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Humor and Stressful Life Events: Stories of Adolescents

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Science

Centre for Health Promotion Studies

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Humor and Stressful Life Events: Stories of Adolescents in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science.

Abstract

This descriptive exploratory study examined humor in the discourse generated with adolescents and its relationship to self defined stressful events. Two questions guided the study: 1) Is humorous expression a part of the discourse generated in the interviews with adolescents who have experienced a self-defined stressful life event?; and, 2) What form does the humorous expressions used by adolescents take? A review of the literature was first undertaken to examine theories of humor, forms and functions of humor, resiliency and developmental tasks of adolescents from which to understand potential ways adolescents might use humor when asked about self-defined stressful life events. Through conversational interviews, several sets of discourse with six adolescents were analyzed. While their use of humor did not surface as boldly as initially anticipated, it none-the-less appeared at various times and circumstances. In-fun humor between two people in the moment of 'being equal with the other' was apparent in the adolescent discourse along with other forms of humor that included making fun of self and others. When an even playing field is achieved through in-fun humor, the subsequent contribution to a cohesive sense of self may very well be viewed as integral to health. As health professionals interested in promoting health, it is argued that a sense of humor may be an important determinant of health. Furthermore, the deliberate cultivation of humorous experience may, in turn, be a significant component of health promotion work.

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Like Luke Skywalker I found the strength to reach my goals in those people that surround me. This thesis has been a ‘work in progress’ for a number of years. And to everyone who asked me ‘How is your thesis going?’, I can now say, It’s done! To everyone who loved me, supported me, nagged me, encouraged me, inspired me and most importantly laughed with me, I thank you.

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Table of Contents

Page

Glossary of Terms		
Prologue		
The Beginnings of a Journey		1
Chapter		
1	The Journey's Roots	5
	The Search for Resiliency and Humor	7
	The Search for Theories of Humor	12
	Theoretical Approaches to Humor and Health	13
	Psychological Health and Humor	17
	Social Health and Humor	19
	The Search for Study Participants	22
	The Search for Humor in Childhood	22
2.	Onward With the Journey: Battle Scars and Victories.....	27
	The Research Question	27
	The Research Method	28
	The Journey Continues	30
	Exploring New Options	31
	The Search for Data	38
	Making Sense: Examining the Interviews	48
	Developmental Tasks	50
3.	Analysis of the Journey	56
	Boba Fett	
	Family Relationships	59
	Humor as an Expression of Self	60
	Humor as Making Fun-of Others.....	62
	Boba Fett's Account of Stressful Life Events	63
	Han Solo	
	Family Relationships	68
	Han Solo's use of Humor and Laughter as a Personal and Social Lubricant.....	72
	Han Solo's Account of a Stressful Life Event	73
	C-3PO	
	Sibling Relationships	77
	C-3PO's Account of Stressful Life Events	78
	R2-D2	
	Self-Depreciating Humor as Self-Acceptance.....	81
	Humor as Making Fun-of Others	81
	R2-D2's Account of a Stressful Life Event	83

Chewbacca and Jabba the Hutt	
Sibling Relationships	85
Chewbacca: Egocentrism	86
Social Health and Humor	87
Fun-of, Funny and In-Fun Humor.....	89
Account of Stressful Life Events	92

4.	Lessons Learned from the Journey	
	Challenges in Studying Humor	95
	Humor and Adolescent Development	98
	Humor Learned Through Life Experiences	100
	Humor as a Form and Function	101
	Humor in Health Promotion	102
	Conclusion	106

Reference List	108
Appendix A: Individual Consent Form	113
Appendix B: Parental Consent Form	114
Appendix C: Parental Information Sheet	115
Appendix D: Individual Information Sheet	116

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

C-3PO: A fussy and worry-prone protocol droid, C-3PO was cobbled together from discarded scrap and salvage by a nine-year old prodigy on the desert planet Tatooine.

Chewbacca: An immense, fur covered warrior of great strength and loyalty, An immense, fur covered warrior of great strength and loyalty, Chewbacca the Wookiee was a well known figure in both the underworld and in the Rebel Alliance.

Dagobah: A distant, mist-shrouded swamp planet, Dagobah does not appear in any modern starcharts.

Boba Fett: A faceless enforcer, Boba Fett's distinctive armor strikes fear in the hearts of fugitives. He is a legendary bounty hunter, accepting warrants from both the Empire and the criminal underworld. He is all business, laconic, and deadly.

Hyperdrive: Travel between star systems would be impossible were it not for the development of the revolutionary hyperdrive propulsion system.

Jabba the Hutt: A loathsome slug of a gangster, Jabba the Hutt was the preeminent kingpin of crime in the Outer Rim Territories.

Jedi Knight: A noble order of protectors unified by their belief and observance of the Force, the Jedi hearken back to a more civilized, classical time in galactic history.

Lightsaber: The weapon of a Jedi, an elegant armament of a more civilized time.

Qui-Gon Jinn: A venerable if maverick Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn is a student of the living Force.

Obi-Wan Kenobi: A dedicated and legendary Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan Kenobi has had a long and tumultuous career that has helped shape the fate of an entire galaxy.

R2-D2: A resourceful, spunky and adventurous astromech droid, R2-D2 has saved the day time and again.

Ring and Run: A childhood prank where the individual rings the doorbell of a home, hides and watches as the person answers the door to find no one there.

Han Solo: If, at the height of his smuggling days, you told Han Solo that he would be a hero of the Rebellion, fall in love with an Alderaanian princess, and become a general in the Alliance, he would have had no shortage of smart remarks for you.

Luke Skywalker: The path of a Jedi is often difficult, filled with conflict and pain. Luke Skywalker's life which began as a simple farmboy and saw him become the greatest hero the galaxy has ever known is an amazing example of this.

Millennium Falcon: A legendary starship despite its humble origins and deceptively dilapidated exterior, the Millennium Falcon has factored into some of the Rebel Alliance's greatest victories over the Empire.

Tauntaun: A species of snow lizard found roaming the windswept snow plains of Hoth.

Darth Vader: Dark Lord of the Sith, was the scourge of the Jedi, a master of the dark side of the Force, and one of the Emperor's most trusted servants.

Yoda: The ancient and revered Jedi Master, lived his final years hiding on the swamp planet of Dagobah.

Prologue

THE BEGINNINGS OF A JOURNEY

This thesis is a description of a research process as it unfolded. It is a narrative account of a journey that began with something like "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ... there was a Health Promotion graduate student at the University of Alberta who very much wanted to know more about the importance of humor in a healthy life." The plot plays itself out as I describe how I began to look for some answers. I say answers because as it turns out, many questions swirled about in my mind. In my search, I came across challenges, certain peril and unexpected twists and turns in the plotline I thought I was following. Crucial, multidimensional characters integral to the journey are introduced and, playing the lead role in the account as the researcher, I explain how I looked for and found humor in the answers of six adolescents when asked about the perceived stress in their lives and what they did to manage it. To me, this account is a page-turner for it uncovered something that I, the writer, didn't even expect to find. The image that best fits what happened is much like what happened to Luke Skywalker, a Jedi Knight in the movie Star Wars, in his search for his father. With this journey ultimately in the form of a thesis, it serves as proof of some kind of academic growth on my part. It has also served as an opportunity for personal growth for it has allowed my own sense of humor and way of expressing myself to shine through.

My journey begins in Chapter One where I review the literature on humor. This review serves as the foundation from which my research question eventually evolves. The literature review no doubt has also had an influence, both conscious and unconscious, on the way I went about looking for the answer to that question. The range

of humor literature was as varied as a Jedi Knight's training is long. I had initially hoped to develop a research question about resiliency and humor used by families as a health promoting strategy. As I immersed myself further and further into the literature, the challenges and possibilities in exploring humor became more and more apparent. The transformation that I went through is described and something I attribute as much to fate as to conscious planning on my part.

Chapter Two is titled 'Onward with the Journey: Battle Scars and Victories'. In it, I introduce the research questions "Is humorous expression a part of the discourse generated in the interviews with adolescents who have experienced a self defined stressful life event?" and "What form do humorous expressions used by adolescents take?" The research method and the ethical review process I proposed from which to examine these questions is described. I explain the initial steps I took to make it all work. Several steps and a few battle scars later, I describe how the initial group of adolescents I had hoped to interview failed to work out. Continuing with my image of a Jedi Knight, I describe how I eventually found six adolescent participants who volunteered to participate in my study about humor. I go on to explain my attempts to get them to share their stories about stressful events in their lives and to tell me how they managed such stress when it happened. With that approach, I hoped to give humor as a coping strategy a chance to surface in their conversations with me. The outcomes from these interviews were not necessarily what I expected. The challenges I faced in trying to make sense of the interviews that I facilitated are described. Like the initial planning phase before the big battle to destroy the 'Death Star' in the movie Star Wars, this chapter lays the foundation for things to come. In doing so, I try to help you understand how I came upon

the characters in my journey and how I in turn played more of a lead role in the journey than I had initially anticipated.

Chapter Three is an analysis of the interview phase of my journey. Here I explain how I went back to the transcripts of the interviews I had with my six adolescent participants looking for answers to my questions about the role of humor in the lives of adolescents in relation to stressful events in their lives. I discuss how difficult it was for me to uncover accounts of stress in their lives, let alone how much they used humor as a stress management strategy. I describe how I approached the transcripts, looking for themes in the way the interviews unfolded. If humor was not often referred to in their accounts of past life events, what was apparent in their responses to my questions? I present three content areas that emerge from their interviews with me: the importance of family relationships in their lives, humor that surfaced in the interviews themselves and their account of a stressful life event. With each of these areas, I examine the role and form of humorous experience they either talked about or demonstrated within the actual interview.

Chapter Four is a discussion of the lessons I learned from my journey. I describe how challenging it was to get to the roles and forms of humor that might be used by the six adolescents in my study in their accounts of perceived stressful events in their lives and how they managed them. The humor that was uncovered is examined in relationship to health, humor development and ultimately, health promotion. The relationship between humor and health promotion are discussed and deliberate cultivation of humor in adolescents is explored. From the perspective of a Star Wars movie, this should be much like the scene when Luke discovers the answer to who his father really is. My journey

doesn't quite end like that. I describe how it helped me learn more about the possible roles and forms of humor in the lives of the six adolescents who took part in my study and its connection to a healthy life. It is a journey that has more of a stopping point than an end. When it comes to understanding humor, there are still many journeys left for this Jedi Knight to take.

Chapter 1

THE JOURNEY'S ROOTS

It is difficult to know where to begin. Perhaps I could start with a cliché like once upon a time.... For this would be a fairytale like none other. I could be the beautiful princess but the story would be lacking key elements like an evil stepmother for which there is none. Perhaps I could start with in the beginning; this document could be then like an epic drama with adventure, strife and a final battle.

I would prefer to think of this document as an action adventure. A journey that began and ended with something that I did not expect. Because like Luke Skywalker was searching for answers, I too was searching for something, something mystical, wonderful and new. I was hoping to change the world with my research, that people would be discussing my work at the water-cooler or comparing it to the invention of the wheel and Coca-Cola.

Like Luke Skywalker I too had help throughout my journey as a researcher, a person who I could call my Yoda. Yoda told me to “talk” about my research so here it goes. Did I find something comparable to the invention of the wheel, something mystical? I guess you will just have to read on....

To me, completing a master's thesis about humor seemed natural because humor is something that I believe everyone possesses and enjoys. I further believe that humor is something cosmic, you can't touch it, smell it, or put in into a box. But you can take it with you wherever you go, and use it as often as you like because you have an endless supply. Much like the ideas of love or hope, it may have a universal effect on people,

although few would be able to verbalize its meaning or describe the depth of the significance to them or the emotional state it elicits.

It is important to have a “fire in your belly” a wise man once told me. When it comes to your thesis work he further said, it is important to write about something you are passionate about. I happen to be passionate about many things: my husband, chocolate, and extra blankets on the bed on cool fall mornings. The wise man asked me to keep a journal and when a great idea for a thesis topic popped into my head I should write it down. As it turns out that wise man whom I could call Obi-wan-Kenobi, in keeping with the Star Wars theme, was right. Before long my journal was filled with enough passionate ideas for a lifetime of degrees not to mention doodles, inspiring phrases, and words of encouragement from friends and family. My journal was an evolution of sorts like chapters in a book or scenes from a movie. But this movie would be a box-office flop as my thoughts and ideas were disjointed and disorganized at best, not to mention however that the doodles were terrible.

Imagine you are shopping in the mall when suddenly you feel a gravitational pull toward a particular shoe store. You had only come to the mall to buy parts for your Hyperdrive so that you could leave the Dagobah system but the unexpected force calls you. (Do you see a theme emerging)? As you walk through the main doors you hear the faint sound track of the movie Star Wars coming from somewhere within and the song gets louder and louder until your eyes settle upon the most amazing pair of black pumps in the entire galaxy. You know, the ones that perfectly match the black dress that you don't yet own! As you pick up the shoes from the shelf, you feel the uncontrollable urge to break into song and draw your Lightsaber.

So why have I painted this image into your head? Well, I have a saying that if it “sings to you” you should go for it, or in this case, buy it. Why do research in the area of humor? Because it sang to me!

I found a thesis supervisor (Yoda) who was a perfect “fit”. A perfect “fit” was crucial in the development of this document. Yoda had done some previous work in the area of humor and she was a natural choice. After one meeting it became clear that I had made the right decision and I had more than enough reading to determine which aspect of humor interested me. After looking at some of the work that Yoda was exploring regarding resiliency and its origins we looked to another supervisor (Qui-Gon Jinn) who had a particular interest in families. We did the math and came up with humor + families + resiliency = thesis.

For the next few months I examined the literature on resiliency and I visited several urban agencies whose programs were based on the concept of resiliency. I did this in order to understand resiliency and how it is used in practice. As well, it was a way to scout for potential participants to study the role that humor plays in the whole area of resiliency.

The Search for Resiliency and Humor

Unlike humor theories, the concept of resilience or the capacity for an individual to recover despite great adversity or life stress is fairly new. Imagine a family that is dealing with many life stresses. Susan is a mother of two children, Robert and Tammy. Robert and Tammy’s father recently died from complications related to alcoholism. The children’s father had never been a positive role model for the children, and his death has put an obvious strain on the family. Although Susan is working two jobs to support the

family financially, Robert has had to quit school and start work to help to pay the bills. Tammy has been missing classes at school, and recently was arrested for public intoxication.

Now, imagine the same family who has examined and faced those life stresses with a positive prospective approach and has grown and learned from them. Susan is a mother of two children whose husband died recently from alcoholism. Realizing that her husband had never been a positive role model, Susan mobilizes her family support to help the children with coping as well as providing them with support. The financial difficulties that the family faces are unavoidable, but Robert has always had an interest in plumbing, so he takes on a job as an apprentice. Tammy persists in having difficulties at school and often comes home intoxicated. Although Tammy states that her drinking is not a “problem” she does admit to having a more positive open relationship with her mother and is able to “talk to her now.” Although this family still faces obvious stress, some positive outcomes have been achieved.

According to the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre (1995a) resilience is the capability of individuals and systems (families, groups and communities) to cope successfully in the face of significant adversity or risk. This capacity develops and changes over time, is enhanced by protective factors within the individual/system and the environment, and contributes to the maintenance or enhancement of health. The concept of resiliency can be easily applied to health and health promotion.

Imagine again a family that you believe is resilient and think about the following three assumptions about resiliency that have been outlined by the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre (1995a). The first assumption is that resiliency or some

factors associated with resiliency can be enhanced. Although some things like genetics are unchangeable, several protective factors have been identified that may be altered. These include: a) parent child interactions, b) household structures and rules, c) family coping styles, d) involvement of father in childcare, e) parental expectations for children's future, f) mother's education level, g) family size, h) connection to adult troubled backgrounds, i) spousal relationships and j) perceptions and employment status of mother.

The second assumption is that resiliency is not static and may change over time. In other words, a family's resiliency may increase with every situation that was dealt with in a positive manner. Similarly, should a new situation arise, and not be successfully managed, the sense of family resilience could be negatively affected.

Finally, the third assumption is that resiliency implies a positive response toward health and well being. A resilient family would focus on positive family functioning and sufficient support to overcome adversity. Imagine again our same family in relation to the above mentioned assumptions. Some of Susan's protective factors including seeking positive interactions for her children, as well as supportive family members to help rebuild family functioning. The second assumption implies that every hardship or situation that Susan and her family deal with affects future resiliency in either a positive or negative way. Susan's ability to relate more to her daughter builds on positive resilience, yet Tammy's drinking issues may negatively affect resiliency. With the final assumption, although the family is not perfect, focusing on the positive aspects like important role models, Robert hopes that future adversity can be overcome.

Three studies to date have examined humor and family functioning. Resiliency as a specific construct is not identified in any of these studies. The focus of the first study is the meaning of the experience of humor within the family (Meguiar, 1988). Two major themes are described. The first is that humor is used by the families as a form of engagement, play or teasing. The second theme is that humor allows members of the family to gain new perspectives or to find a temporary release. This study concludes that humor may be used as a positive resource in therapy.

The second study examines the relationship between the use of humor and the level of functioning in family systems and adaptation level (Francisco, 1989). Although no significant correlation is found between adaptation and family functioning, four dimensions are associated with humor: problem solving, communication; affective involvement, and behavior control. This study concludes that the use of the Modes of Adaptation tool based partly from Roy's Adaptation Model and humor might be indicators of healthy family functioning (Francisco, 1989).

Finally, the last study explores the use of humor in the family. Here stronger families are found to use humor more often than weaker families to maintain a positive outlook on life, entertain themselves, reduce tension, express warmth, put others at ease, facilitate conversations, lessen anxiety, and help cope with difficult situations (Wuerffel, 1986).

Wolin and Wolin (1995b) link humor and resiliency in their work. Using a retrospective analysis of clinic interviews they have identified seven examples of resiliencies that may help an individual to respond actively to protect themselves against

difficulties in their families. One of the seven resiliencies identified is the use of humor where:

Humor is finding the comic in the tragic. Humor minimizes troubles by “turning something into nothing,” a trauma into a mere joke. An offshoot of creativity, humor also begins with playing, grows into the capacity to see the troubled family’s behavior as absurd, and culminates in an ability to laugh at one’s own emotional pain (Wolin & Wolin, 1995b, p.421).

After examining the apparent gaps in the literature and the need for research in the area of humor and resiliency, I began to contact health promotion agencies in the community who employed a resiliency approach with a family focus. I contacted eight individuals with varying backgrounds and from different organizations ranging from referral services for aboriginal people to an agency that supports blind persons and helps their families participate in society. One connection was with a local group that was launching a social marketing multimedia campaign based on resiliency principles. The main theme of the campaign is “You will never know the difference you make ... Preventing alcohol, drug and gambling problems” (ADDAC, 1998). The major messages were that kids become resilient when they are supported, cared for, meet high expectations, are challenged and contribute in a meaningful way to their lives. As well, it emphasized that interactions between adolescents and influential people no matter how much time is spent have a positive influence on preventing addictions, promoting resiliency, and raising awareness about how individuals influence youths (AADAC, 1998).

This contact, for me, was invaluable. AADAC was putting resiliency theories to use. Could this be evidence-based practice? When I asked my contact about the role of humor use in this campaign she stated that it was not the focus, but that it had been used previously in the past in youth NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) groups. She suggested that I try contacting these NA and AA groups but for reasons beyond my control this suggestion could not be pursued. It did get me thinking about other potential participants. Like a Jedi scout I continued on my journey by examining agencies and speaking to many individuals. Before long I had an abundance of agency contacts that did not necessarily use resiliency in their practice but these were places where I could recruit participants.

Meanwhile back at Jedi headquarters I was also busy examining particular aspects of humor. This section, then, is a review of what I found. Feel free to laugh out loud if you want to!!

The Search for Theories of Humor

Philosophers and other writers have been speculating about the nature and importance of humor since Plato's time. It is impossible to determine when human beings first began to puzzle over the nature and functions of humor. It is possible however to assume that as long as humans have been around, so has humor. For instance, would it not be fun to imagine early caveman philosophers marveling at the complexities of the world during the day while laughing in the evening about the size of their fire in comparison to their neighbors who had not yet mastered the art of banging two rocks together. Like most theories, explanations by philosophers and other writers for humor have been recorded at least as far back as the early Greeks.

Aristotle and Plato (incidentally the names of my two goldfish) thought that laughter was considered to be an effective means of controlling excessive, ridiculous, or otherwise unacceptable behavior. Those who laughed too much or had an imbalance of the four humors were quick to be labeled ‘humorists’ and these people were often objects of ridicule. Thankfully humor has developed greatly over the years, otherwise this entire paper might have been subject to ridicule.

No one definition of humor receives universal acceptance. Lefcourt & Martin (1986) state that humor, smiling, and laughter are good examples of ‘slippery’ phenomena as these aspects of human experience and behavior are most difficult to define, isolate, and examine scientifically. O’Connell (1976) suggests that operational definitions of comic, wit, and humor are as rare as unicorns. Webster (1986) defines humor as “the quality in a happening, an action, a situation, or an expression of ideas, which appeals to absence of the ludicrous, or absurdly incongruous: comic or amusing quality” or “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or, appreciating ludicrous or absurdly incongruous elements in ideas, situations, happenings or acts: droll imagination or its expressions” (p. 1102).

The relationship between humor and health is not a new question. Despite our limited knowledge of the mechanisms underlying humor and laughter, the belief is widespread that laughter is beneficial to one’s physical and psychological well being (Goldstein, 1987; Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993).

Theoretical Approaches to Humor and Health

One of the earliest theories of arousal postulated that the function of laughter and humor is to reduce built-up tension or energy. The implications of this theoretical approach for understanding the therapeutic effects of humor are evident. If stress is seen

as involving increases in tension and arousal, then clearly the tension relieving effects of humor and laughter would serve to reduce the effects of stress (Lefcourte & Martin, 1986). The arousal theories of humor suggest that responding with humor and laughter in a stressful situation may either reduce the physiological arousal experienced in that situation, or alter one's perception and experience of that arousal in such a way that it is not experienced as negative or aversive (Lefcourte & Martin, 1986).

Freud's theory of humor may be regarded as an arousal theory although the Freudian theory contains features that could arguably make it a superiority or incongruity theory as well (Lefcourte & Martin, 1986). O'Connell (1976) argues that Freud appeared to have spent more time and effort attempting to unravel the mystery of the humorist compared to any other theory builder. In "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1960), Freud states that the principle of 'economy' and psychic energy play a primary role in the production of pleasure and satisfaction. In order for someone to experience a comical situation, a shift must occur from the serious to the trivial. As a result, the consequent savings of energy is discharged as laughter (Freud, 1960). It was not until Freud himself was dealing with his own an illness did he differentiate between wit and humor. Describing humor as a rare and precious gift, Freud described a humorous attitude toward himself as a way to ward off possible suffering and laughter as a means to avoid painful feelings that an individual would rather not experience.

It is true that the pleasure derived from humor is never so intense as that produced by the comic or by wit and never finds a vent in hearty laughter. It is also true that, in bringing about the humorous attitude, the superego is in fact repudiating reality and

serving an illusion. But we attribute to this less intensive pleasure a high value: we feel it to have a peculiarly liberating and elevating effect (Freud, 1928, p.116).

As a gift that the ego gives itself, mature humor offers an opportunity for sustenance and consolidation throughout life (Poland, 1990).

The most popular approach in explaining humor consists of an attempt to isolate particular qualities of the stimulus that lead to the perception of “Hey that was funny!” It has been proposed that the perception of incongruity (i.e., of an event that violates an individual’s expectation) is a necessary condition for the experience of humor, (Fry, 1963; Koestler, 1964; McGhee, 1971; Shultz, 1976). The elements of ‘surprise’, ‘shock,’ ‘suddenness’, or ‘unexpectedness’ have been regarded by many theories as being closely related to that of incongruity (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). In other words, that which is originally perceived in one (often serious) sense is suddenly viewed from a totally different (usually implausible or ludicrous) perspective, and the original expectation bursts like a bubble, resulting in a pleasurable experience accompanied by laughter (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). O’Connell (1976) explains this in terms of being able to make rapid perceptual-cognitive switches in frames of reference. This flexibility to shift perspectives allows one to distance oneself from the immediate threat of a stressful situation and therefore to reduce the often paralyzing feelings of anxiety and helplessness (O’Connell, 1976). Moody (1978) supports this notion saying that: “A person with a good sense of humor is one who can see himself and others in the world in a somewhat distant and detached way” (p.232). While this altered perspective is something that can be laughed about, the person remains in contact and emotionally involved with people and events in a positive way.

According to Kuiper et al., (1993) a sense of humor may mitigate the adverse cognitive effects of stress in at least two ways. The first one is when individuals who generally respond to life in a humorous manner appraise their environment as threatening and therefore may experience less stress in their lives, than those with fewer humorous responses to life experiences. Second, in situations that are experienced as stressful, individuals with a sense of humor increase their effective coping skills by making more benign reappraisals of the stressor. From this cognitive perspective then, high humor individuals have better psychological adjustments and better emotional health (Copier et al., (1993).

The final of the three theories examined is the superiority theory. From this perspective, the roots of laughter come from the sense of triumph over other peoples or circumstances in life (McGhee & Chapman, 1980). Thomas Hobbes was quoted as saying “the passion of laughter is nothing else but some sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.” Aristotle (the orange gold fish) thought that laughter is brought about as a primary response to ugliness or weakness. Hobbes and Aristotle disagree in that Hobbes believes that it is the imperfect and blemished who laugh at others and not the powerful and unblemished. It is commonly thought, however, that appreciation of humor is perceived when we feel smarter, prettier, stronger, or more fortunate than others. Ridicule, mockery, and feelings of superiority are central to this perspective. The salutary effects of humor derived from enhanced feelings of self-esteem and inner strength result from the bringing to naught of real or imagined threats through humor (Lefcourte & Martin, 1986).

Psychological Health and Humor

According to Strozier (1987) humor, insight, maturity, and indeed empathy and creativity are not isolated aspects of the self but parts of an integrated process. He further elaborates that humor is psychologically central to life, linked to other aspects of the self in ways that are almost impossible to unravel. In the past two decades researchers have demonstrated with certainty that stressful life events have an adverse impact on an individuals' psychological and physical well being (Porterfield, 1987). What is yet to be seen, and what remains to be the biggest problem for researchers, is the need to examine the extent of humor impact on the life experience.

Does humor moderate stress-full events? Is humor used as a coping mechanism during these difficult times? Are persons with a well developed senses of humor more adaptable to difficult situations? Are they happier? Martin & Lefcourte (1986) cite three studies indicating that humor moderates the impact of stressful life events on mood. For those individuals with low scores on measures of sense of humor, increased levels of stressful events produce greater levels of disturbed mood. In contrast those individuals with a higher sense of humor show little or no increase in stressful life events.

One study by Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller and Hampes (1997) examines the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale. In this study, scores on the scale are related positively to a number of factors associated with psychological health, such as optimism and self-esteem, and negatively with signs of psychological distress such as depression. In examining the psychological health of nine women, Rose (1990) states that humor was used by all women but one. In his opinion, the ability to laugh is a way for the participants to freshen their perspectives, to release energy, to gain distance in order to

keep focused, to feel lightness in intense situations, to see both sides, and the paradox in life. In another study of college students, Kuiper et al., (1993) have observed that individuals with a high sense of humor tend to make initial cognitive appraisals of potentially stressful events in an event-enhancing manner and engage in personal distancing as an effective coping strategy.

Another way to consider the positive affects of humor is through the work done on Type 'A' and 'B' personalities. Type A personality, characterized by seriousness, stress, concern with time, impatience and hostility is associated with a greater incidence of heart attack than the 'Type B personality' (Mantell & Goldstein, 1985). One possibility for this is that a sense of humor may displace anger, anxiety, and hostility. According to Strozier (1987), the cohesive, flexible self can tolerate a huge variety of stress and even face its own demise. The connection between this flexible self and the degree of stress in life to humor is obvious. He argues that one of the better ways to recognize cohesiveness, vitality, and zest is through the presence of humor (Strozier, 1987).

In contrast, the study by Safranek and Schill (1982) suggests that neither humor appreciation nor humor use moderate the relation between stressful life events and depression or anxiety. Replicating the study by Lefcourte and Martin (1986), Porterfield (1987) does not find a relationship between humor and its moderating effects on negative life events either. A study by Janus (1975), undertaken to investigate the relationship between comedians and their anxiety and depression and the function of humor in their success as comedians shows that those comedians studied were brilliant, angry,

suspicious, and depressed. This suggests that although humor may very well be therapeutic in nature, its use does not necessarily represent one's psychological health.

Social Health and Humor

While it is generally considered that laughter and humor are primarily social phenomena, the amount of research conducted in this area is surprisingly scarce. Most studies related to humor and its social nature have been conducted over four decades ago. It is generally accepted that social laughter is part of normal adult conversations. According to Berlyne (1960) some functions of social laughter are to cover up nervousness, make others feel at ease, fill in the gaps, and generally make conversations more enjoyable. Because laughter can be generated in a solitary state, Berlyne suggests that the primary significance of humor is not a social one. Fine (1983), on the other hand, argues that humor and laughter imply a social relationship, a connection between self and others. While humor can be experienced by a solitary individual in that one may laugh at oneself, or during a television show, a humorous event generally takes place within the context of social interactions.

One of the challenges in humor studies is how to examine the relationship between humor and social interaction. These difficulties are not limited to social aspects of humor. Research on wit and humor is generally approached as if there were such external reliably measured 'things' as humor, readily available for unequivocal classification (O'Connell, 1976). Humorous stimuli alone are responsible for causing a humorous response in subjects. However, social forces that influence the creation and appreciation of humor must also be considered (Fine, 1983). Chapman (1989) indicates that nearly all researchers have confined themselves to studying responses to humor

stimuli, and they themselves have selected the presentation of the stimuli. He suggests four further reasons why little is known about everyday functions of humor: a) there is little systematic research on humor, b) the studies that have been reported on social aspects of humor have drawn from a diverse range of loosely formulated theoretical perspectives (for example, many studies have focused on extending knowledge about social behavior, social development, and group processes rather than on exploring the dynamics of humor per se, leading to a fragmented sense of research, c) by and large humor studies have not been sufficiently exhaustive in the measures and procedures adopted; and, d) many studies have been laboratory-based where, like many of the more subtle aspects of human behavior, humor loses much of its spontaneous character when placed under insensitive laboratory scrutiny.

Humor can serve as a communicative function because of its wide implications for intergroup relations and intragroup relations. From the group's point of view, the most commonly referred to positive function of humor is that it serves as a 'social lubricant.' It makes social interaction easier and more enjoyable (McGhee, 1989). It is thought that the individual who knows when and how to use humor puts others at ease and creates an environment in which all forms of communication are easier. Furthermore Kane et al., (1976) note that a cheerful demeanor is an invitation to interaction. Martineau (1972) further speculates that not only does humor serve as a lubricant it also may act as an abrasive to instigate or augment interpersonal friction.

Common experience suggests that instances of humor can simultaneously serve a number of functions for the individual and these can differ according to the social context; jokes and other forms of humor may have multiple and variegated effects

on their initiators, targets, and bystander recipients. A joke which appears innocuous to an outsider may perhaps increase morale and consolidate one particular group whilst sustaining or intensifying hostility towards another group; it may also encourage the reciprocation or aggression from that group (McGhee, 1989, p.127).

It is also widely thought that persons who are skilled at using humor regularly are considered more popular among their peers and find it easier to develop new friendships (McGhee, 1989; Goodchilds, 1972). The literature in this area indicates this might be partly attributed to heightened social cognitive abilities and or an increased level of interpersonal competence (McGhee, 1989; Geizer, Rarick, & Solodow, 1977). Interpersonal competence has been defined as the extent to which one monitors one's verbal and nonverbal behavior, as a function of situational cues present (Chapman, Smith, & Foot, 1986). It has also been proposed that when humor and laughter occur in a social context there is generally a strong sense of 'sharing the social situation' (Chapman, 1976; Chapman et al., 1980). Humor may also be used as a means of self-disclosing information that might otherwise be difficult to communicate (Foot, 1986). Such self-disclosures may in turn produce great feelings of intimacy (McGhee, 1989).

McGhee (1989) addresses four other functions of humor related to specific social goals. The first is humor initiation in a search for information. Telling a joke or making a playful/joking comment focusing on a particular theme or group allows one to discover something about the other person's attitudes, motives, and values as a function of their reaction. This form of 'social probing' serves as a means of assessing how open the other person is to accepting the person making the comment. A second function served by

humor is as a way of communicating sensitive information to another. By allowing a person to say something ‘without really saying it.’ Humor is a vehicle for discussing embarrassing topics or in self-disclosing anxieties, fears or other intimate information (Sanford & Eder, 1984). Information that otherwise might not be addressed is enabled through humor. As a third function humor may also be used as a tool to express our feelings toward someone, whether those are positive or negative in nature. A final function served by humor is the use of a joke or playful remark to replace embarrassment with laughter. Similarly, if tension or hostility between two individuals threatens to provoke a confrontation, a humorous remark can defuse the tension and hostile atmosphere and open the way to a more constructive form of interaction (McGhee, 1989).

The Search for Study Participants

Somewhere between networking with the health promotion agencies and looking for study participants, the focus for my research changed. Although I initially hoped to find families to study their use of humor, it seemed as though most of the health promotion agencies that I examined were orientated to a different group... adolescents. This was a realization on my part that here was a potential group of people that I may study. The community contact from AADAC was particularly encouraging, and so it seemed I had a new focus. My area of interest transformed or metamorphosed into something else. Was it fate? Was it the force? Or was it something more simply related to an interest I have always had?

The Search for Humor in Childhood

While little has been written about humor in adolescence, more attention has been devoted to the development of humor and humor use in the earlier developmental stages

of life. It has been proposed that the perception of incongruity (i.e., of an event that violates an individual's expectation) is a necessary condition for the experience of humor (Fry, 1963, Koestler, 1967, McGhee, 1971, Shultz, 1972, 1976). McGhee and Shultz both observe that incongruity-based humor is one of the earliest forms of humor in children. The ability to appreciate incongruity-humor depends upon the child being able to engage in symbolic play. This occurs at about eighteen months of age. At this time children also become capable of experiencing incongruity-humor. When the child recognizes a stimulus, as inconsistent with the past experiences, the result is a humorous reaction. For example, at eighteen months of age, a child will laugh at an adult acting like a puppy. With developing language skills, a six to eight year old might consider the following example of incongruity-humor extremely funny:

Question: What is grey, has four legs, and a trunk?

Answer: A mouse on vacation.

While Freud did not devote any special attention to humor in children, later writers have. Wolfenstein (1978) argues that while the devices utilized vary with age, the basic motive of humor is to overcome distress and provide a momentary release from frustration. As children develop, Wolfenstein (1978) argues that they become increasingly aware of societal and personal restriction placed on sexual and hostile impulses. Much of a children's joking then is an attempt to free themselves from the impossible longings and wishes by picturing their fulfillment in the ridiculous as in a joke (Wolfenstein, 1978).

Grojahn (1957) argues that children first discover comic situations when they begin to notice differences among people. Feelings of superiority to other children cause children to see their mistakes or weaknesses as "funny." An example of this discovery

might be the following comment by one boy to another, “You throw like a girl!” Over time and with aging, the sense of superiority and subsequent humorous response becomes more subtle. For example, consider the following joke:

There are two Irishmen in a pit. One said to the other it's dark down here. The other said, I don't know, I can't see.

The Gestalt theory of humor development is another theory that could be useful when examining humor development in children. Here the meaning of an element or group of elements depends on the whole configuration of which it is a part and changing some aspect of the whole may greatly change the meaning of both the whole and specific constituent elements (Maier, 1932). Applying this theory to humor, it is the anticipated meaning juxtapositioned with a restructuring of events that produces a humorous experience. Bateson (1969) stresses that the structure of a joke draws our attention to specific elements while others are not emphasized. We ‘get the point’ when the background material is suddenly central and the result is surprise and humor. To demonstrate this, consider this joke adapted from Bateson (1969):

A man who works in an atomic plant carries a wheelbarrow full of excelsior past a gate guard every day for some period of time. The worker repeatedly states that there is nothing in the wheelbarrow except excelsior, but the guard finally threatens to put him on the suspect list unless he tells what he is stealing. The worker then admits that he was stealing wheelbarrows.

Because a certain level of cognitive ability is required to restructure the joke or understand the paradoxes in a story, it stands to reason that cognitive development and developmental stages are closely linked.

The arousal theory is based on the premise that we become increasingly aroused as we listen to the development of a joke in anticipation of the punch line. Our arousal is then decreased through a smile and laughter. The level of arousal reached and the degree of the drop are increased by the addition of material that is, in some way, emotionally arousing to the recipient of the joke (McGhee, 1979). Berlyne (1960, 1969) argues that the gradual build-up and release of tension in children forces a mental effort to assimilate new situation into old schemas. If a new situation presents itself and there is no effort made or ability present to assimilate the information, there will be no build-up of tension and hence, no humorous response to the situation. While children frequently laugh in social situations, they do not normally laugh at jokes they do not understand, and their response to a humorous incident is generally spontaneous and genuine (Enders, 1972; Kenderdine, 1931; Ding & Jerslide, 1932; Brackett, 1934).

A study by Brackett (1934) demonstrates that children learn early how laughter and humor may be a very effective ways to achieve certain social goals. At this point children may learn to laugh and smile for other reasons than understanding incongruency humor. With children, humor is a private experience. For example, the capacity for a child to engage in pretend play and to create imaginary relationships has been observed in children by the second year of age (Ding & Jersild, 1932). Chukovsky (1966) argues that between the ages of two and three children begin to share their humorous experiences with others. The extent to which children communicate their humor with others may be explained by the amount of social reinforcement received from adults or other children.

At this point in my research journey, it was clear that the personal and social use of humor has been addressed from a variety of perspectives. Why it happens and the

functions it serves have been of particular interest to superiority, incongruity and arousal theorists. Along with these theories, explanations have been developed regarding the personal and social functions of humor.

While it was clear to me that the value of humorous experience had been acknowledged in general, there was still much to be discovered. While my review of the literature had outlined a landscape for me to consider, it was now time to set my course in a more specific direction.

Chapter 2

Onward With the Journey: Battle Scars and Victories

The next step in this battle for me was to develop my proposal and send it to the ethics review board. The most difficult part for me thus far was to put my thoughts and ideas on paper. I had already completed my literature review looking at humor, so the rest should be easy right? Right! The development of my proposal went fairly smoothly or so I thought. Little did I know that this was false assurance. New battles were yet to come my way.

The Research Question

Most would agree that a good research question is essential to guide the research and subsequent written work. This would be the ‘fire in your belly’ that Obi-wan-Kenobi talked about. My question eventually evolved into one where I wanted to explore the place of humorous expression in the life stories of adolescents who have experienced a self-defined life crisis. I assumed that humorous expressions would be present in adolescent conversations. After all, I have heard teenagers’ laughter when they meet in malls, at movie theatres, at sporting events. What I was most curious about was when and how, they would use humor in conversation with me, particularly as they talked about difficult times in their lives.

For the purpose of my proposal, I developed two questions to guide my study: 1) Is humorous expression a part of the discourse generated in the interviews with adolescents who have experienced a self-defined stressful life event? and 2) What form does the humorous expressions used by adolescents take?

Finally! I had two specific aims. While not expressed as a guiding question, I realize now that I was also curious about whether adolescents recognize, how and when, they make use of humor in their life stories.

The Research Method

Having an appropriate research method to guide the work is as equally important as a good research question. In my examination of the way adolescents who have experienced a self-defined stressful life event in their life talk about their experiences, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate means by which to gather data and to eventually examine it. Through conversational interviews it was my plan to generate several sets of discourses with several adolescents that would serve as the data for my study. This recorded and transcribed data would in turn be analyzed for the place and role of humor in the adolescent's way of talking about their life experiences.

For this study, I planned to employ a descriptive, explorative method. The purposes of descriptive studies are to observe, describe, or document aspects of a situation as they occur in a natural setting (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Other descriptive studies are undertaken to examine the presence or absence of a particular occurrence. In this study, I planned to observe and describe adolescents in their conversations with me. The aim of this type of methodology is to describe particular phenomena rather than explain its occurrence. In doing so, I hoped to examine the presence or absence of humor in their conversations and describe how they used humor when speaking about their lives. Because of the 'fluidity' of this research design, this type of qualitative research is considered exploratory in nature (Polit & Hungler, 1995). As little research has been

completed regarding adolescents and humor, this method is an appropriate means by which to enter into adolescent experiences with humor.

The selection of study participants was to be purposeful in nature. In purposeful sampling, participants are chosen because they have knowledge or experience of the phenomena under study and because they are able to reflect and articulate their experience and are willing to share it with the interviewer (Morse & Field, 1989). In this study, the participants were to be adolescents who had experienced a self-defined crisis. In order to qualify as a participant in the study, the adolescent was to: (a) be between 12-18, (b) have had a self-defined stressful event in their life, (c) be able to speak and understand English, (d) be accessible for the interviewing process, and (e) be able to commit to at least 3, one hour interviews.

It was proposed that six participants be interviewed for the study, and in the end six participants who volunteered met the inclusion criteria. This method of purposeful sampling works to uncover the nature of particular life experience. It is not a means for assessing how typical the individuals are who participate in the study. In other words, the participants from my study were not expected to be representative of a population group as a whole. Rather, I was concerned with all the ways the participants might talk about their life experience to determine if humor was used and if so, what forms it might take in their conversations with me.

I planned to gain access to the population in ways. Upon ethical approval of the study, I planned to gain access to potential participants through advertisements posted in places where adolescents hang out. Letters of support from relevant agencies interested in the study and their willingness to help would be obtained to support these

advertisements when permission would be required for their posting. Preliminary exploration of health promotion agencies in the community had been undertaken and response had been favorable to the posting of these advertisements. Adolescents would be invited to contact me by the telephone number provided should they want to participate in the study. Further information about the study was to be offered through a public presentation to potential study participants upon request.

The Journey Continues

Before any interviews could take place ethical approval had to be obtained. I had heard from my classmates that the process was similar to a job interview. Wow, were they wrong! When I was six years old I dove off of the high diving board at my local outdoor swimming pool. Somewhere between the top and the bottom of the pool my bikini had been partially removed. If you don't think that this is stress...think again. I am a firm believer that all things happen for a reason, and that there was something to learn from that situation (other than to make darn sure that your bikini top is fastened tightly and that bikinis are not the bathing suit of choice at high velocities)! My experience with the ethics review board made me feel like I was at the bottom of the pool with no bikini top on all over again. The whole 'procedure' was actually very civilized. There are two rooms: one for waiting and another where a 12-person panel sits to review your proposed study. I came early in case the panel was running ahead of schedule. After discussing with a few of the other students/professors hoping for ethics approval in the waiting room, this I discovered apparently never happens. Yoda had promised to come and be with me during what I was sure would feel like an interrogation session. I vaguely remember the specifics of the review procedure, but I do clearly remember doing a lot of

nodding and smiling at all the people making comments. In the end it all worked out just like it did when I pulled myself out of the swimming pool screaming and running toward the change room. After the initial shock, ethical approval was obtained and after a few minor changes, I was able to go ahead with my study.

I made contact with a few agencies in the area, and they in turn posted my participant recruitment advertisement and sent the University a letter of support. I waited by the telephone for the adolescents to call. As you can imagine there was little success there. I wondered, although my advertisement was at a basic reading level, if the potential participants were able to read it? I also thought that the adolescents might not be willing to be interviewed if there was no reward for participation. Devastated that my telephone was not ringing off of the hook other options had to be explored. Using ‘the force’ to guide me I had to explore other options.

Exploring New Options

My first option was to make a connection with a group home for adolescents who no longer lived at home for various reasons. I met with the group home psychologist first. It all seemed pretty surreal when she enthusiastically supported my study plan. It was all coming together, all my hard work and persistence was paying off. With four boys and four girls identified as potential participants, all I had to do was build some rapport with them, and then just like that, eight participants for my study!

During my application for ethics approval I vaguely remembered one of the members of the panel who spoke about the difficulties in interviewing teens but it was all down hill from here... right? I had read about rapport building, and it was my hope to employ four main concepts. The first concept was that of caring. Arnold and Boggs

(1995) describe caring as a commitment that involves respect and concern for the uniqueness of the individual. This commitment was to be used with all interactions with the participants.

The second and most important concept was that of trust. Trust was to be created throughout the interviews with study participants. Once a sense of trust is established between two people, a sharing of feelings and emotions occurs (Arnold & Boggs, 1995). Understanding that trust is based on past experience, I considered the possibility that this population may not have had positive experiences with trust. Many of the potential participants had been in trouble with the police, abused by their family members, or in difficult relationships with their parents or caregivers. To counter this, it was clear to me that I would have to employ several techniques designed to gain their trust including: being respectful, actively listening to them, being honest with them, following through with commitments, and using attending postures and expressions when communicating with them (Arnold & Boggs, 1995). These I could manage, or so I thought.

The third concept was that of mutuality and includes shared commitment and collaboration with the study participant. In an attempt to foster mutuality with the study participants I realized would have to be aware of my own beliefs and feelings and keep track of these in a personal log. I would have to develop a way to share these in an appropriate way so the participants would see that we were part of the exploration process.

Finally, the concept of empathy needed to be employed with the participants. The ability to perceive and convey the participant's feelings is important. As an empathetic researcher, I would have to work at recognizing each participant as a unique individual

(Arnold & Boggs, 1995). With my background in nursing, I thought that this would come easily. How wrong I was.

After two months of working with a group of eight teens, two days a week, for 5 hours per visit, one would think that my four principles of rapport building would have been achieved. I thought for sure that they would be lining up to participate in my study. WRONG!! Somewhere in my journey I lost sight of the fact that these adolescents have ‘issues’ beyond anything that I had seen before. How could I have been so naive to think that after playing baseball, building puzzles, cooking and generally hanging out with this group that these adolescents would automatically want to take part in my study? Some of these teens had a history of ‘carving’ themselves (self-mutilation) ‘just for fun,’ while others had been prostitutes and sexually abused, at the very least. Being able to self-define stressful life event as an inclusion criterion was definitely not a problem with this group of adolescents. Imagine the scene when I finally sat this group of teens down after 80 hours of rapport building and explained my study to them. While I was clear about my professional and academic intent, it was a surprise to me when no one in the group immediately volunteered to be in my study. Zero volunteers!!

Adolescence has been coined as a time of storm and stress (Stone & Church, 1968). When I think of the first adolescents I hoped to be in my study, I am reminded of my first boyfriend, Jason, who also gave me my first kiss. I am also reminded of the petty fight I had with my girlfriend, Joanne, who I recently saw at our elementary schools 50th anniversary. How different we were as adolescents compared to those at the group home! (Incidentally Joanne and I decided to forgive each other when we re-connected as the actual logistics behind the argument were no longer clear). What became increasingly

clear while spending time at the group home was how uncharacteristic the adolescents there were and how it would be to compare them to ‘normal’ adolescents. Perhaps the term storm and stress is appropriate only to certain times and settings.

After this reflection I went to the caregivers who work daily with this group everyday and I discovered some interesting observations on their part. The first one was their view of me ‘popping’ in for a few hours a week. To them, this was problematic because the lives of the adolescents in the group home were based on structure and a regime. As well, it was possibly difficult for the adolescents to relate to me because I was unfamiliar with the rules of the house, and they did not see me as an authority figure. The third observation was that because I was unfamiliar with the group’s dynamics and history, I was perceived as more of a ‘friend’ than someone with knowledge and who could be counted on. And finally, and probably the most devastating was the group’s perception that I was less than honest about why I was visiting the group. When asked what I was doing at the house I often replied that I was a student at the University, and not that I was recruiting participants for my thesis work. Talk about blowing the whole trust issue out of the Dagobah system!

Saving my tears for the drive home, and feeling overall very disappointed I hoped that things would look up. This whole situation left me not looking like Luke Skywalker at all but a lot more like Jar Jar Binks. So where was I to go from here? The staff agreed after our debriefing session to talk about my study with the adolescents again after dinner. The next day I returned and miracles of miracles, two adolescents had volunteered. Now my research was really underway! I would interview these two participants and they

would tell the others how cool it was, more would volunteer to be part of my study and before you know it I would be defending my thesis. Right? WRONG! AGAIN!

While finding participants had been a challenge, I had no idea the complications I would encounter with the informed consent process for these particular adolescents. Who consents for participants who are in custody of the province or country? Who consents for participants who are in joint custody? What happens when the social worker who can give consent lives in Halifax and does not return telephone calls? How does a researcher prepare for jumping over all those obstacles? After six weeks of telephone calls and finally getting the required consent, I made arrangements to interview one participant. After she realized that the interviews were going to be one-on-one and tape-recorded, she promptly withdrew. It was a discouraging moment. Having spent three and a half months in this setting I had little to show for it but the insight into what I could have done better.

So some may ask, “What did I learn from this situation?” This experience was my first glimpse into some of the difficulties that I was to encounter in studying humor and adolescents. I gained insight into ‘difficult’ adolescents and how rapport building is not as easy as a textbook might imply. I also learned that the perceptions varied as to what I felt my role at the group home was and how the adolescents viewed my role. Finally, I realized that although initially the group home seemed to be an ideal place to recruit participants, the consent process was extremely challenging and this made for a difficult recruitment process.

It was time to consult with Yoda. After a review of the situation, we decided we needed a fresh start. I needed to find participants living in less complicated circumstances who were willing to be interviewed. During the meeting, Yoda had a

revelation. No, it was bigger than that. It was an epiphany (Yoda isn't the head of the Jedi counsel just because she is green you know)! "What about youth groups?" she said, "Maybe you could connect with a local church group!" At first I was hesitant. I wanted to interview teens who had experienced stress in their lives. Would adolescents in a church youth group have any problems, let alone be willing to laugh at them? I went home that day promising Yoda that I would contact the youth group soon, but I still had some reservations. Is this the direction I wanted to go with my thesis work?

Later that day I took the Millennium Falcon over to my friend's house, who had three teenage daughters. We discussed my situation over tea and what I had hoped to accomplish and learn along my journey. She made a few valid points, and painted a picture in my mind about what I consider 'everyday' teenagers. Although they are not involved in what is known in Star Wars as the 'Dark side,' they are faced with issues like peer pressure, underage drinking, divorce, theft and pregnancy. That is what I needed to hear. With a renewed sense of hope I made arrangements to meet the youth group recommended by Yoda.

Compared to my previous experience, this one was virtually the opposite. I had made arrangements to meet with the youth group one Tuesday evening. I must have had the wrong date or time because a nice gentleman showed me where the group meets. But no one was there. Thinking I was off to a terrible start, I contacted the group leader and left a message with her. When she returned my call she confirmed my suspicion that I had the wrong time, and we made arrangements for the next week. Determined to make a good impression and with the right date and time in hand I went to meet the youth group. There were about 20 people including a few adults. The group leader introduced me and

said I would have a chance to speak during the break. In an attempt to ‘fit-in’ I worked on the activities that the group was doing. I felt a little out of place but the adolescents tried to make me part of the group. At one point the leader asked us to write down on a piece of paper what we liked best about Sunday school. When one of the girls noted that I was not writing anything down, she asked if I was having difficulty thinking of anything like she was. She stated that she hated Sunday school and could not think of a thing. When I explained that I had nothing to write down because I had never been to Sunday school, we both laughed. She stated that she thought I was very lucky.

Feeling that I had obviously made an impression, it was my turn to address the group. I noticed that there was one boy who kept making jokes and cracking up the group. The group leader said “Well that is Tony for you.” I really wanted him to participate in my study because he seemed to use humor in many different situations. After a brief explanation of my study seven teens volunteered, five of whom met the inclusion criteria. Alas, Tony was not one of the five, I felt sad that he did not volunteer but also happy for five others were willing to participate. Over a period of 4 weeks I made contact with all those who volunteered. Informed consent was obtained from both the parent or legal guardian and the participant after presenting the details of the study to them and giving them the opportunity to ask questions about it (see Appendix A and B). An information sheet was provided to each participant (see Appendix D) and each parent or legal guardian (see Appendix C). I was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel! The consent for this group was easier than I had imagined. With six participants I was off and running. For me this was the real beginning of my mission. I felt as if this was truly where my search for something mystical, wonderful and new was about to begin.

The Search for Data

The main method of data collection in this study was the use of unstructured conversational interviews. “The aim of the unstructured interview is to elucidate the respondents’ perceptions of the world without imposing any of the researchers’ views on them” (Polit & Hungler, 1995, p. 271). Some of the advantages of the unstructured interview is that the participant need not be able to read or write, the researcher is able to observe the responses, questions may be clarified if needed, data is not dependent on predetermined questions, and the response rate is higher than that of a questionnaire (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Such interviews allow the researcher to question a group of study participants about the same issues, starting out with a broad question relating to the topic. This type of data collection allows the researcher to proceed without a preconceived view of content or flow of information to be gathered and to continue until no new information is forthcoming (Polit & Hungler, 1995).

What were the implications of this data collection method for my study? Humor itself is a unique phenomenon in that when studied/explored directly, it can either be exacerbated or stifled (Robinson, 1990). By asking the participants to talk about their life experiences and how they coped with challenges in their lives, I hoped to let humor surface in a natural way if it was going to occur at all.

In an attempt to maintain confidentiality I assigned my participants names of Star Wars characters to keep with my own emerging sense that I was in a Star Wars adventure (and I also thought that it would be fun). I made a list of broad open-ended questions that I thought would put the participants at ease when first meeting them. For instance, I asked all participants what they like to do for fun and what types of music they like to

listen to. I also asked them questions, hopefully, that could elicit self-insight and self-awareness such as: “How would your best friend/mom/dad describe you?”

My first interview with a new participant was always a time for me to be self-conscious and a bit nervous. I was afraid that the interview might be perceived as an inconvenience and me as an intruder. My very first interview was with Boba Fett (incidentally one of the galaxy’s best bounty hunters and favorite character in the movie). Despite the movie version of Boba Fett being a menacing figure, my Boba Fett struck me as slim, athletic and full of energy. After a quick introduction to Boba Fett’s mother and sisters, Boba lead me into the living room. Because I knew it was possible the participants would discuss their interview experience with each other at church and at school, I was anxious to make a good impression with each one of them. I wanted them all to stay in the study so badly. Sadly, the first interview setting was not particularly ideal. The room was poorly lit and noisy, the adults were doing the dishes next door and Boba’s little sister kept popping her head in and out of our space. Yoda had spoken of the importance of conducting interviews in a quiet place as noise would interrupt conversation and possibly make transcriptions difficult.

My field notes, which I completed after this interview, indicated to me that I may have been overly concerned with the noise in the room, and that it may have possibly detracted from my interview technique. I noted that I often found myself switching topics quickly, not focusing on important topics enough. Whether it was the noise, the participant, or my nerves I went home feeling like not much had really been accomplished. Although I had minimized a direct approach to exploring the place of humor in their lives when telling them about my study, my interest in humor had been

identified on the consent and information sheets read and signed by the participants and their parents. I couldn't help but wonder if Boba had zeroed in more explicitly on my interest in humor than I had hoped. Maybe she was part of the rebel alliance? Consider the following passages for example where the occurrence of laughter is indicated by italic print.

Luke Skywalker: You have a best friend? How do you think your best friend would describe you?

Boba Fett: Funny.

Luke Skywalker: Funny? Why do you say that?

Boba Fett: I don't know. Me and her, we have a *lot of inside jokes*. And she's the only person I can really be like that around. I can be funny around other people, but it's just about certain things. I guess she'd say I was funny and good to talk to, because — I'm not in any of her classes at school and we hang out with different groups of people, but we can always go to each other to talk about our problems and stuff, and she's a really good listener, too, and I *think that I am*.

Luke Skywalker: How do you think your mom or dad would describe you?

Boba Fett: I don't know. I think they like to see me as someone who's really hard-working — which I guess I am, but *not at the moment*.

Luke Skywalker: Not at the moment hard-working?

Boba Fett: Yeah. I don't really know what else. They'd probably say I was funny, too, and outgoing.

Luke Skywalker: Why do you think they'd say you're funny and outgoing? Can you give me an example, maybe?

Boba Fett: When we go on family trips and stuff, I'm always loud and making it funner, *I hope*.

Luke Skywalker: *You hope!*

Boba Fett: Making everyone laugh, and teasing my sisters and stuff.

Luke Skywalker: Do you think that helps them on those long trips, when you're cracking jokes?

Boba Fett: I think sometimes it does, because to help keep it happy, like —

Luke Skywalker: And light?

Boba Fett: Yeah.

Luke Skywalker: And you've got one sister?

Boba Fett: Three.

Luke Skywalker: Three sisters? Three littler sisters?

Boba Fett: Yeah.

Luke Skywalker: Holy smoke! How do you think *they* would describe you? That's kind of a tough question, eh?

Boba Fett: Yeah. The one that's closest in age to me — she's 12 — well, actually,

she's 13 now — I think she would probably say funny, too, and — yeah, funny. *That's all I can think of.*

These responses to my questions initially seemed to demonstrate little insight or self-awareness on Boba's part. It wasn't until I actually saw the transcripts from this interview that I realized I also needed some time for reflection. In reading through the transcripts I saw how many times I ignored the natural flow of the conversation, and redirected it toward topics I wanted to discuss, mainly stressful life events. I was so intent on finding a stressful event, something we could uncover together, and discuss it so I might discover if and how humorous expression occurred. I found myself redirecting the teen back to stress at every opportunity. What if my participant's didn't think they had stress? What if a stress was just part of growing up? Did I introduce stress into their vocabulary? Examine this section.

Luke Skywalker: I think when I called to make a first appointment with you, you were having music lessons, and you're not taking any calls during music lessons. That tells me that that must be important to you. So tell me about a time when you've been kind of stressed out. Maybe for soccer tryouts, were you kind of stressed?

Boba Fett: Yeah. There's that, and school. Not the marks, really, but everything that's been going on at school with, like, social stuff, at the moment, and my marks just go. I just got a report card a while ago, and my marks were good, but I dropped from last term. So my parents are a little upset because I'm supposed to go up, and I'm stressed about that. Then, yeah, the tryouts and everything from school.

Luke Skywalker: It's stressful being a kid, eh?

Boba Fett: Yeah. So much.

Luke Skywalker: Some people don't think it is, though. They're like "oh, that's kid stuff." But it's hard being a teenager, I think. I'm just thinking, what kind of social stuff at school? Are there pressures to conform and be like other kids?

Boba Fett: Yeah, there's pressure that way, but I've kind of gotten over it. There's a little bit of that. There's a lot of that at my school, but I just care a little about that. But then there's the pressures of, like, who you're friends with, and all the friend stuff, then the guy stuff, and everything.

At one point in the interview I found myself disclosing information about myself to elicit information and increase reflective thought on behalf of the participant. Boba and I were discussing ‘inside jokes’ as she termed them. I found myself talking about a similar situation perhaps to increase the participant’s reflection on the topic or perhaps to normalize the situation for her. For example, when Boba made fun of a person she knew, I responded with a similar situation:

Luke Skywalker: My friend Krista and I are like that. She’s my very best friend in the whole world. And sometimes, all we have to do is give each other this look and we both know what the other person is thinking. Know what I mean? It’s the *best*! Those are the best times, ever, I think, is when you don’t even have to say what’s on your mind, ‘cause she just already knows. Sometimes, we’ll be, like, walking down Whyte Avenue, and we’ll see a girl in a weird outfit or something, and I’ll just look at her and give Krista this look, and Krista’s just like — she totally *knows what I’m talking about*, because she was thinking the very same thing. I think that’s why she’s my best friend is ‘cause she knows me pretty well. Just like your friend knows you pretty well.

When I was describing a similar situation to Boba, I was hoping to normalize her experience and solicit a more in-depth response from her. Boba did not share any new information about this situation as a response to my disclosure. This might have been due to rapport having not yet been built, and also because we were both very nervous. In later interviews with other participants this technique worked nicely to set the stage as to what I wanted to discuss next or to elaborate on certain topics.

For the second interview with Boba I had a new batch of questions that focused on a self-defined stressful event in her life and how she coped with it. I employed similar techniques for using open-ended questions, and questions about what was new since the last visit to relax the participant. This interview went much better! It had only been a week since our last interview, but it seemed as though we had more rapport this time as

evidenced by Boba's open attitude to discussing personal topics. The room was quieter and we both seemed more focused. Finally after what seemed like light years my interviews were completed with Boba and fully transcribed. Yeah for me!

My next set of interviews was with a participant whose Star Wars name is Han Solo (who, by the way, barely survived the carbon freezing chambers of Jabba the Hutt in the movie). I would describe Han as a tall girl who has not yet grown into her size. She described herself as gangly and awkward. I would agree. Even before the interviews began, Han appeared to be nervous and uncomfortable because she fidgeted and found it hard to look at me or smile. Han and I had two interviews each of about 1 hour in length. During the first interview Han's mother was present because she was curious about the study and wanted to help out. I did not feel as if I could ask her to stay out of the interview so I encouraged Han's mother to help respond if Han needed assistance. At one point during the interview I asked Han how she thought father would describe her. Following is an example of how both Han and her mother responded to such a question:

Luke Skywalker: How do you think he would describe you? These are hard questions, eh? Brain busters.

Han Solo: I try hard.

Luke Skywalker: In school, do you mean?

Mom: And you're sweet, and you're cute, and you're lovable. You give lots of hugs. You laugh at his jokes, so he thinks you've got a good sense of humor.

My field notes completed after the interview indicated that I thought it was important to have Han's mother near during the interview as Han appeared to be very nervous, not unlike myself during my first interview. Han's mother tried to provoke reflective thought on Han's part. On more than one occasion I asked a question to which Han responded. Then without prompting on my part, Han's mother asked further

questions to clarify Han's response. This happened when I asked Han what qualities are important in a best friend.

Luke Skywalker: Why do you think that's best friends are important?

Han Solo: Well, 'cause if they can't make me laugh, then it's boring. When I say laugh at me, I [phrase] sense of humor —

Mom: It's different with your other friends. What makes her a special friend for you?

Han Solo: She lives close to me, and she's really close to my age, and she likes basketball and swimming.

Mom: And Beth lives even closer than Laura does, and she isn't a best friend. I guess she doesn't do all the same things that you and Laura do. Are there any other qualities about Laura that make her better than some of the other friends or is more special?

Han Solo: I don't know. I don't know.

Mom: She has a quiet kind of way —

Han Solo: Well, I've known her for even a longer time — maybe the same amount of time as Beth.

Luke Skywalker: Is she funny in a quiet way?

Han Solo: Beth's pretty crazy, and Laura — sometimes crazy, sometimes not. Laura always wants everything to be perfectly fair. [phrase] about her. If we're sharing a can of pop or something, pouring it into different glasses, she always makes sure *they're exactly the same amount!*

Luke Skywalker: So Laura's quieter than Beth, do you think?

Han Solo: Well, Laura is pretty quiet around people that she doesn't know.

Mom: What about Suzan? Susan's somebody that's at least in your Grade —

Han Solo: Except that I'm the same age as Laura.

Mom: I know, but in terms of that, kind of compare and contrast, what kinds of things make —

Han Solo: I've known her for a long time, too. She's also tall —

Mom: But tall doesn't *make best friends necessarily*.

The next interview went just as smoothly as the first, although Han's mother was not present. My field notes indicate that the interview was much more 'friendly' and the conversation flowed from one topic to the next. As with the other interviews, I developed a second batch of questions for Han that I thought would lead back to my main research question.

Chewbacca and Jabba the Hutt were my next set of interviews. Although in the movie Star Wars they would be unlikely friends (more like sworn mortal enemies), these two participants were brother and sister. I immensely enjoyed my time spent with these two interviewees. While they shared some physical characteristics, for example their hair color was a similar shade of brown, Chewbacca appeared to be more outgoing and enthusiastic and Jabba, three years younger than Chewbacca, was more reserved. I am unclear as to why I decided to interview both these participants at the same time except that they were living in the same home and that it seemed convenient. I was unsure how interviewing two participants together would effect the results of the study or if my interview technique would change. While the interviews with one participant were to be approximately one hour in length, with two participants in the interview, I had to continue recording on the other side of the tape. Our conversation flowed very nicely. The thing that I remember most about these interviews, and my field notes confirm it, was how easy it was for this pair to reflect on a personal level and to provide insightful observations. On more than one occasion I had to stop and think to myself are these kids really teenagers? For instance when we were discussing whether or not it is harmful to make fun of other people, the discussion changed then to why we make fun of people. These are Chewbacca's and Jabba's replies:

Chewbacca: Probably lack of self-confidence in themselves, probably. I don't know. I remember I was watching this one show, and there was this lady who was really fat and she said that always when she walks into a crowd of people, she'll look and see if there's someone fatter than she is to draw attention away from her. But what I can do when you're at school, you want to try to make someone a geek so you can have your scapegoats.

Jabba: It's not — no down, no matter what, even if it doesn't mean anything to

you at the time, eventually, it's going to build up, and it doesn't feel good at all to be at the bottom, always getting picked on and everything like that. People don't want that.

Chewbacca: But I think it's, yeah, so you can always have a scapegoat, always make sure you can always have something to fall back on, like who's going to be worse off than you, sort of thing.

After these two interviews I really felt like I was getting into the stuff that my thesis was supposed to be about. I felt like I could see the light at the end on the tunnel and it was not an oncoming train!

My next two interviews were with R2-D2 (a character is Star Wars that needs no explanation!) R2-D2 had blond hair and wide toothy grin. After several attempts to reach R2-D2, we finally made arrangements to meet. R2-D2 stated that his parents were very busy. While I missed the opportunity to meet them, R2-D2's dog and cat met me at the door. I was lead to a small cluttered table in the kitchen of the warm and inviting home. This interview again went very smoothly. Could I be getting better at this? This participant, more so than all the rest, was dealing with many stresses in his life. During the first interview, I thought to my self that "This is it! The stuff that theses are made of!" But alas, I found that the 'good stuff' was still difficult to uncover. My field notes indicated that I was still concerned about the fact that when we discussed situations and experiences in R2-D2's life that I thought would be but that he did not. Conversely, when we discussed what seemed to me as less stressful situations R2-D2, expressed feelings of stress. I had hoped to uncover more regarding particular aspects of this participant's life in the next interview. As with the others, I developed another set of questions concerned mostly with R2-D2's ill sister and troubles he had with the law. At one point during the second interview R2-D2 was explaining what happened when he

was caught stealing. I tried, like with Boba, to recount a personal story about a stressful event in my life to see if I could provoke further discussion. During these interviews this technique proved to be ineffective. Examine the following section.

Luke Skywalker: We go watch a funny movie or something. That makes us feel better, laughing a little bit, then we kick back and relax a little bit. We actually went to — the nurses are striking, the LPNs — have you heard? I work at the University Hospital and the support staff is striking, and it's TERRIBLE! My manager is washing toilets and cleaning beds and stuff. It's terrible and it's kind of stressful, so we went to go see "Where the Heart Is," about the girl that has the baby in the *Wal-Mart*, and oh my gosh, we laughed so hard! Just after that, we left, and we felt so much better. It's weird how just hanging out with your friends and maybe laughing a little and *watching some funny movies helps out, you know?* Do you think you find that?

R2-D2: Yeah. Just like with my friends, hanging out.

Luke Skywalker: I guess it's just one of those things that just to relieve a little bit of stress is helpful.

R2-D2: Yeah.

My last set of interviews was with C-3PO. Due to time restraints and difficulties coordinating an interview time, only one interview was completed. C-3PO was a petite blonde who got a great tan on spring break in Hawaii. While this was a happy event for her, C-3PO had many stressful events going on in her life. Her Grandmother was recently ill, there was unresolved conflict with her friends and her school grades were poor. While viewed as stresses, C-3PO seemed unconcerned about them. My field notes and transcripts reflected that on more than one occasion I attempted to question C-3PO about these events. However I was unable to provoke any further discussion as the following transcript demonstrates.

Luke Skywalker: You like lunch hour, hanging with your friends. Do you have a best friend?

C-3PO: No, not any more. Me and my friends just got in this big fight.

Luke Skywalker: Why?

C-3PO: I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine.

Luke Skywalker: Really?

C-3PO: I came back from Hawaii, and they all hated me.

Luke Skywalker: Oh, no.

C-3PO: I really don't care, though. We've been in fights before, and I've made new friends.

Luke Skywalker: That's good. Are you not stressed out about it at all or anything? Were you stressed out when you came back initially and you're, like, what the heck's going on?

C-3PO: Yeah, the first couple of days, but then I said, who cares — move on with my life. My friends will come and go, but life's gonna still go on.

Making Sense: Examining the Interviews

While the process was unfolding as it should, when I read through the transcriptions, I wondered if there was anything useful in them! Were they as good as the discovery of Coca-Cola? It was time again to reconvene the Jedi Counsel and discuss with Yoda and Qui-Gon Jinn. After a pitcher of iced tea and focused discussion, we all agreed the data had potential. In fact, we explored how it could be analyzed in a number of different ways. Yeah for me again!

Yoda and Qui-Gon gave me three tasks to complete before our next meeting. The first was to review the tape-recorded interviews and transcripts to identify all the times that laughter occurred during the interviews. I used a yellow highlighter to indicate times when one of us laughed, and a pink to denote when both of us laughed. This strategy was important as a means for becoming more aware of laughter as an outward sign of humor. While laughter in itself does not necessarily reflect a humorous response, it is a possible indication that humor may be present.

The second task was to perform a preliminary analysis and look for emergent categories or themes in the transcriptions. Seven were identified. Most participants engaged in some sort of recreational activity for varying reasons, so this became my first

grouping. Now, you may be wondering what does this have to do with humor? My answer to you is nothing!! I did, however, have a reason for my madness. When I questioned the adolescents about what they did to relax or calm down after a stressful event, I expected them to say “Hang out with my friends. Have a few laughs.” They did not say this! Most indicated that they went for a bike ride or swim. So this is why I made this grouping.

The second grouping I labeled as stress. My husband pointed out that this is most likely because I repeatedly asked them about it. How could they not comment? This grouping was made every time a participant talked about stress or discussed strategies for stress reduction. Again, within this grouping the interviewees did not mention that humor was used specifically as a means to cope with stress in their lives.

Throughout the interviews there was repeated evidence of the participants making fun of themselves or of other people. This became my next grouping. Closely related to this was the next one where the participants joked with me. Throughout the interviews the participants laughed and displayed their sense of humor, whether it was joking with me or retelling a story about a silly thing that happened to them. These sections were difficult for me to analyze as they seemed unrelated to my research questions. The participants did have a sense of humor. But did they use this sense of humor during experiences of life stress or when talking about those experiences?

In my literature review I discussed the functions of social humor. This did emerge in the transcriptions so I made this my next grouping. It is unclear, however, what function this type of laughter fulfilled. Did the participants laugh so as to share the

social situation with me or did their laughter act as a social lubricant to ease their discomfort in being interviewed by me?

The sixth grouping was that of coping mechanisms. The participants discussed coping during times of stress or trouble (again most likely because I specifically asked). This grouping was related to many of the others, in that some of the material may be found in other groupings. This grouping was used to examine how the adolescents dealt with episodes of stress.

Finally the largest grouping was that of self-insight. Throughout the interviews the participants showed remarkable self-reflection when discussing everyday aspects of their lives. On the whole, they were able to respond to difficult questions that I posed during the interviews, continually amazing me with their insight about themselves and their family.

Developmental Tasks

My third task was to review developmental theory for adolescents and consider possible implications for the place and role of humor in adolescence. I began by examining Piaget and Erikson's theories of development and looking for some evidence of such development in the interviews I had with my participants.

Adolescence is a time that brings about both physical changes and cognitive changes. Cognitive characteristics associated with formal operations and associated with this developmental phase include manipulation of abstract concepts, hypothetical deductive thought, and a scientific and problem solving approach (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992). In abstract thought the adolescent is able to identify and deal with what may be possible, as well as what is real. It is in abstract thought that the adolescent may ask

questions such as “what if” and “why not” (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992). An example of such adolescent idealism from my interviews occurred with R2-D2 discussing possibilities regarding his career:

Luke Skywalker: And you like art, right? You think you’re strong at that?

R2-D2: Pretty strong. My parents didn’t want me to take art, though, ‘cause they’re like — I don’t know — my parents convinced all of us to take music, the whole family, because they say we can take art as an extra-curricular thing. But I want to take drama, ‘cause I love acting. I was in the drama club, but this year, couldn’t find time to do it ‘cause I was in all the concert bands. My parents, they were really mad at me. It’s still fun.

Luke Skywalker: What do you think they want you to be when you grow up? Do you think they have high expectations for you?

R2-D2: Yeah. I wanted to be — I still want to be — a robotic engineer. Or I’m going to quit my job and become a professional snowboarder or biker!

It is this type of formal operational thought that allows adolescents to approach problem solving in a new way. Piaget (1977) describes how the thinking of an adolescent differs radically from that of a child. A child is able to develop concrete operations and is able to carry these tasks out in everyday life. The adolescent however, is able to integrate all tasks learned in concrete operations and now tries to take up adult roles (Piaget, 1977). With adolescents thought is transformed in that they are now able to both construct and make use if theories. As thought is transformed, adult roles can be assumed (Piaget, 1977). This new flexibility makes it possible for adolescents to view difficult problems from many perspectives (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992). For example, the following interview the participant realizes that his behavior not only has consequences in the present but positive and negative consequences for his future (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992).

Luke Skywalker: You got caught stealing?

R2-D2: Yeah, the first time.

Luke Skywalker: What did you steal?

R2-D2: I stole — it was, like, hostess things. And Steve told my mom. Yeah, it was, like, “Bob, you were caught stealing.” He talked to me really loud. I’m, like, Steve, sHutt up — ‘cause he came over for a sleepover. My parents heard me, and I got in a LOT of trouble. They talked to me about stealing and stuff, and I denied it all. Then one day at school — ‘cause I didn’t have a lot of friends at school then I don’t know — I just didn’t — I used to hang out with Steve ‘cause he’s kind of, like, low — and we went to a Redi-Mart, and HE stole this time, and he blamed it on me. The owner got really mad and he called the police. The police came to our school and talked to all of us. Steve denied it and said I bribed him, and, “If I didn’t do it,” I’d beat him up. He’d been hanging around with his other friends, Jason and stuff — it was, like, awful. The people called my home. My mom was just mad at me, so she didn’t trust me for a long time. So my whole summer, I only got 2 weeks when I wasn’t doing stuff, apart from my summer vacation, which was 2 weeks. So it was 2 weeks of my own time and then 2 weeks on summer vacation. The rest I was just doing, like, loaded with camps.

Luke Skywalker: How did you feel when you were busted for stealing and stuff?

R2-D2: Oh, awful. I was shaking and so scared. *It’s the police, eh? Shaking.*

Luke Skywalker: So what did you do?

R2-D2: I road it out over time. I did everything I could to gain my mom’s trust.

When adolescents begin to think more like scientists and devise plans to solve problems they are logical thinkers (Santrock, 1995). In the above example R2-D2 was able to demonstrate logical thought by concluding what the best course of action would be in a stressful situation. However, as Piaget (1977) acknowledges, there is more to thinking than logic. As Chewbacca demonstrates in the following passage, there is emotion as well.

Chewbacca : I remember one thing that’s pretty recent, more for me, was one of my friends is having some really big problems right now, and one day after school, I was just so afraid for her, I came home and I just cried for so long. I was just really sort of scared and really stressed out over this whole situation. I remember my mom wasn’t home and I probably wouldn’t tell her this anyway — I couldn’t tell my dad at all. So I phoned one of those stress lines where *you can talk things through*. So I talked to a lady on there and that was neat, just to talk to someone who was just — all I needed was just somebody to listen ‘cause I was the only person who

knew about the whole details of this whole situation. I couldn't handle it to have it all inside me, so I talked to her.

Luke Skywalker: That's kind of cool knowing about those kind of things. There was a lot of stress in you just knowing about it, being responsible —

Chewbacca: I was so afraid for her. It was at a climax in the whole scenario, and I didn't know what to do, so I just phoned. Originally, I tried to tell one of my other friends that didn't actually know this friend, and she started freaking out at me about it. I thought, I can't handle this any more.

Erickson (1950) argues that youth begins with the advent of puberty and the establishment of a good initial relationship to the world of skills and tools. In their search for a new sense of identity, adolescents have to address tasks seemingly mastered in earlier years. The formation of ego identity then is the ego's ability to integrate the sum of childhood tasks (Erickson, 1950). If the adolescent fails to resolve this stage, optimum development will never be obtained. An individual's inability to settle on their identity results in role confusion (Erickson, 1950). The extent to which the adolescent successfully resolves their developmental tasks influences their success in finding identity (Maynard-Hill & Murphy, 1982). Chewbacca demonstrates a sense of ego identity when talking about her parent's separation in the following example. While experiencing the freedom to establish herself as a separate person, Chewbacca nonetheless sees her mother as a role model.

Chewbacca: When they first split up, I was okay with that. But then later, I found I was really get stressed out about everything, and almost depressed, and it wasn't because of my parents at all. It was just that I felt that things weren't working much. My friends at school, the slightest things, everything made me feel guilty, or you feel like you're all alone and stuff like that. It didn't take too long before I came out of that. Actually, my mom taught me tons of good things. She taught me so much about sticking up for yourself and how to deal with stress and time and everything like that, and that helped me a lot. Pretty much with her help, I just picked myself right up out of that. It's just, like, everything's awesome, better then before.

Some adolescents also may have what is known as having a negative identity (Dacey & Travers, 1996). An example of this was R2-D2's account about was playing 'ring and run,' not because he wanted to but because he had doubts about his role in his peer group. Adolescents who do not develop a sense of self may feel self-conscious and have doubts about themselves and their roles in life (Maynard-Hill & Humphrey, 1982). Erickson (1950) describes adolescents as eager to be affirmed by their peers, and ready to be confirmed by rituals, creeds, and programs which may at the same time define what is evil, uncanny and inimical. The following demonstrates R2-D2's struggle with such adolescent rites of passage:

R2-D2: They were playing ring and run again, and I don't want to get into that because I don't want to get into trouble. I can't afford it, 'cause don't want to go to summer camps all summer, 'cause I want to hang out with them. But I can't avoid it. I can stay behind and watch and just run with them, but, like, it's hard on me, 'cause they try and get me to do it with them. "Oh, man, it's so easy. You're not going to get caught. Just go." I'm like, "No, I can't do this." No matter how bad it is, you know you're going to get — it's like a paranoia thing. I think if I don't wear my helmet, the one time I'm biking without my helmet, I'm going to get hit by a car or something, or I'm going to fall, and that's the way I think.

Luke Skywalker: The one time you ring and run, you're going to get caught.

R2-D2: Yeah.

Luke Skywalker: So why do you think they want you to do it?

R2-D2: I don't know. To prove I'm not chicken. I know that's it, 'cause they're like, "Oh, man, you're such a chicken, you're not going to do it."

Luke Skywalker: How's that make you feel when they tell you those things?

R2-D2: Bad, 'cause they don't understand. *My life's at stake*. If my parents caught me again, it'd be awful. I'd be sent packing for a month, some summer camp.

Luke Skywalker: Have you tried telling them? Telling your friends, "Look, I can't, because if I get caught, I'm going to be in trouble."

This chapter has outlined how the direction of my research unfolded. As the title implies, it was not a journey without scars and victories. Like Luke Skywalker who followed a precarious route in his search for his father, it felt

much the same as I moved in one direction and then another looking for the answers to my questions about the role of humor in adolescent lives. My journey could have been aborted when the first place I looked did not produce any participants. With the lessons I learned from those challenges however, I set a new course and eventually found a group of adolescents who were not only most suitable for my study but willing to join me in my journey.

My hope that humor would surface naturally through conversations with them about self-defined stressful events in their lives proved to be the next challenge in my research journey. The following chapter outlines how I approached the interviews with my study participants. I talk about the difficulties I had in discovering the role that humor played in these adolescent's lives. Whether it was in how I approached the interviews or due to my decision to get at humor through their perceptions of stressful events in their lives, I analyze the results of our conversations and summarize the kinds of humor that surfaced and the possible functions such humor played in their lives at the time they spoke with me.

Chapter 3

ANALYSIS OF THE JOURNEY

It seems as though after every section I complete of my thesis, I think Wow! That must be the most difficult part. This section, however, is different. I'm not sure that it is so much difficult as that it is hard to really get into. Yoda and Qui-Gon-Jinn both talk about the importance of immersing myself into the data to both begin to analyze the data and to gain an understanding of the data's meaning. So here I sit with papers, transcripts, textbooks, and notepads all around me and I wonder if this is what they both meant? Am I truly immersed or am I taking their suggestion a little too literally?

Yoda also reminded me that before I dive in (no reference to the bikini incident) I should keep my research question forefront. Throughout this whole process I should be examining where humor presents itself in the transcriptions, if at all, when the adolescents discuss stress. If it does emerge what kind of humor is it? What forms does it take? It seems simple enough. So why do I sit here pretending to look busy when my husband walks by? Well I guess it is time to take the bull by the horns or in keeping with the Star Wars analogy, the Tauntaun by the reigns and start immersing myself.

What occurred to me while I was examining the first transcribed interview was that it was important to do some preliminary analysis before I developed the second set of interview questions for each participant. Following each interview I completed fieldnotes and then developed questions that focused on areas that needed further exploration or clarification. Morse and Field (1995) describe the importance of developing probes for questions that have been designed to elicit information such as: Tell me about a time when you felt like you were in totally stressed out? How did you cope with the stress?

During an interview with Chewbacca, for example, I tried to question the participant further about a situation she described to me the week before. The following is an example of how, upon completion of the first interview, I developed a new set of open-ended questions.

Luke Skywalker: Sounds alright. So what I want to talk about today is how you guys deal with stress and stressful situations. We could start by talking about how you think that your friends deal with stressful situations, or your mom or your dad and stuff. Do you want to start with that? Have you ever had a really, totally stressful situation, Chewbacca, like a crisis of some sort?

Chewbacca: We have minor ones all the time, little ones. Yeah, I think it would be easier to talk about what other people do.

Luke Skywalker: You spoke last time about one of your friends that was kind of in a little bit of crisis, and you called the Help Line person for yourself, I suppose. So how do you think they deal with being stressed and under a lot of pressure and that sort of thing?

At the beginning of the interviews, I asked a few general questions to help us both relax. Although I could not find any support for this in the literature, I had hoped that my first few questions would be on a topic the adolescents knew well... themselves! Morse and Field (1995), discuss the importance of letting the participants 'tell their story.' Which can be achieved by a good "tell me" question.

With Boba Fett, my first question was "Tell me a bit about yourself." Seems like a perfectly good open-ended question, doesn't it? But Boba Fett, like most of my participants, needed a little more direction than that. So what were Morse and Field talking about? As I read on, I discovered that they describe this as a common situation, further adding that the interviewer should let the participant begin where they like. I suspect the difficulties that Boba and I encountered were related to being in an unfamiliar situation with an unfamiliar person. As well, I had deliberately de-emphasized my interest

in how they used humor on my information sheet presented to them in discussing my study. Remembering from my literature review, a challenge when studying humor is to either exacerbate or stifle it by the mere act of playing attention to it. By underplaying my interest in how they used humor in their lives, I wonder if there was confusion as to what I was looking for and expecting? I suspect that if a participant agreed to be part of a study that examined eating disorders and family coping, the interviewee may have been more prepared to tell their story. Examine the following section to support my discussion:

Luke Skywalker: I guess what we'll do for the first little bit of the interview is maybe you could just tell me a little bit about yourself, Boba Fett.

Boba Fett: I don't really know what to say — I'm 15. Things that I like to do ...

Luke Skywalker: Sure. Tell me that.

Boba Fett: I play soccer a lot.

Luke Skywalker: On a team?

Boba Fett: Yeah. And I just tried out this year, and I made a competitive team for outdoor. And I play the drums and piano.

It is at this point in my analysis that I am struck with some difficult questions. Is humorous expression part of the discourse of adolescent? Absolutely! Looking at the interview transcripts, they are littered with laughter. But that is not what my thesis work was to be about. My original intent was to examine whether humorous expression is part of adolescent discourse when discussing a self-defined stressful event in their life. Little of the laughter that occurred in Boba Fett's interviews was associated with Boba's difficulties at school, with her parents, or her boyfriend. So where was I to go to from here? Think Luke... think! Use the force! I guess that I could also be asking the question, if humor is not found in the discourse of adolescents in their description of a self-defined stressful life event then why not? At this point in my analysis the best course of action I decided was to talk about what I did find. So here it goes.

Boba Fett

My first impression of Boba Fett is that here was a young lady who knows who she is and what she wants. Her strong opinions of herself and her abilities will become the focus of the first phase of my analysis, then I examined her relationship with her parents. Next, I looked at Boba's use of 'fun-of' humor in her interview and finally, the times of stress for Boba with particular attention to how she made use of humor and the forms it took were examined.

Family Relationships

Boba Fett indicated that her relationship with her parents was a source of stress for her. She stated that her parents were upset with her about the quality of her schoolwork, and also they indicated that they disapprove of her new boyfriend. Boba used humor when she talked about how her schoolwork had suffered lately. Examine the following section.

Luke Skywalker: How do you think your mom or dad would describe you?
 Boba Fett: I don't know. I think they like to see me as someone who's really hard-working — which I guess I am, *but not at the moment*.
 Luke Skywalker: Not at the moment hard-working?
 Boba Fett: Yeah. I don't really know what else. They'd probably say I was funny, too, and outgoing.

This example of laughter might be actually serving two different functions. Could her laughter here be an indicator that we are touching on a sensitive subject? Could she be making light of a situation that may be difficult for her to discuss? Boba's quick move to change the topic may support such a claim. When questioned further, she neglected to comment.

Another explanation may be that Boba feels guilty about the fact that she no

longer seems to be such a hard-working person. She makes light of it my making fun-of herself. The result is then laughter, which may in turn demonstrate the difference in relative social power between her parents and herself (Podilchak, 1992). One effect of laughing about not working so hard might be to challenge the traditional power relationship she has with her parents.

Humor as an Expression of Self

My first impression was that Boba was unlike any other adolescents that I know. For instance, when we discussed her taste in music, Boba indicated this was something that she “liked” about herself. She also joked that it makes her “mad” when a particular band that she enjoys becomes more popular and has “teeny-bopper” appeal.

Boba Fett: Yeah. I like them. I really, really like hard rock music.

Luke Skywalker: Like what? Who’s your favorite band?

Boba Fett: A British band, [Cold Chamber?]

Luke Skywalker: I don’t think I know them.

Boba Fett: *Yeah, no one knows them.* That’s why I like them. A lot of the bands — some of the bands that I like — like you’ve probably heard of Corn —

Luke Skywalker: Yeah, I’ve heard of Corn.

Boba Fett: I like the kind of music, but they’re starting to get out, too mainstream. And that makes me mad, because all the *teeny-boppers* are going to start liking them. So that makes me mad.

Another example of Boba’s individuality came through when I questioned her about her plans for high school.

Luke Skywalker: You sound very busy. So next year — *high school!* What do you think about that?

Boba Fett: I don’t know. I’m actually looking forward to it, because my school is really cliquey. There’s a lot of cliques in it. It’s not good, so I’m just glad to get kind of a fresh start where it’s — high schools, I don’t think, are as much like that, as junior high.

Conformity to peer groups and allegiance to group cliques appears to have powerful

control over adolescents today (Santrock, 1995). If this is true, then it does not seem to be the case for Boba Fett. She comes across as being very much an individual and finds this aspect of herself important. Santrock (1995) describes how individuality is based on two dimensions, both of which I think Boba Fett displays. The first is her ability to communicate her points of view. The second is her ability to describe how she is different from others (like enjoying different alternative bands).

So what does Boba Fett's laughter in both these situations and demonstration of individuality indicate? I would suggest that her comments relate back to feelings of wanting to be different from the other "teeny-boppers." Perhaps Boba Fett's use of laughter in the above situation might be an example of her 'ego' strength. Does Boba consider herself to be different than others and therefore does she believe that her peers are preoccupied with her (Santrock, 1995)? Or does she just have a strong sense of self? If Boba's laughter was supported by egocentric thoughts, her laughter would be related to a superiority theory. In other words, Boba feels that she is 'better than' the other girls in her class, and therefore, her use of laughter might demonstrate feelings of increased inner strength.

Boba indicated early in the interview that she thought that she was very good at soccer. We laughed together when she was discussing her contributions to the team. Examine the following section when I asked Boba about her last soccer tournament.

Luke Skywalker: What position did you say you played again?

Boba Fett: I pretty much play everything.

Luke Skywalker: I was going to say, you pretty much play everything.

Boba Fett: Yeah, 'cause my team, it's a low-level team 'cause it's community, and now I play the rep team, which is a level higher than community. My team was in Tier 5, and I'm in Tier 1 now, so it's a big difference. I'm kind of the team.

Luke Skywalker: *You're the team?*

Boba Fett: Well, I'm not the team, but I'm one of the better players, so I play everything. My regular position is defense, but I move up to forward and when they need me back in defense, I play defense. But I don't want to carry the whole team.

Social cognition may be a reason for Boba's apparent egocentric responses. An adolescent who is egocentric would believe that others are as equally preoccupied with them as they are, and that they have a sense that they are very unique (Santrock, 1995). Does this describe Boba Fett or am I putting all my Hyperdrive coils in one basket?

Humor as Making Fun-of Others

When I first began interviewing Boba Fett her responses did not show her sense of humor as much as make me wonder if she was too aware of my ultimate interest in humor. For instance, I asked her how her best friend would describe her and she stated "Funny." When I probed further she stated that it was because they shared "a lot of inside jokes." Later on I again asked her about the inside jokes and she shared a few stories, both of which contained some laughter during the discourse.

Luke Skywalker: What about soccer? Do you guys have any inside jokes or anything that you guys like?

Boba Fett: We have this other girl that we play against. Her name's Pam, and she used to play on our team, and she would be really mean to us because she just felt so sure of herself. So this year, when we play her — we're a lot better than her now — and we make fun of her because her makeup, *it's caked on*. And it's brightly-coloured *orange*. It looks so stupid! And you don't need to wear makeup to play soccer, but she's caked on and bright.

Then she further elaborated about another insider joke that she and her friend share. In this story Boba and her friend are making fun of a boy in their school who reminded her of a fish she once had. This passage was littered with laughter throughout.

Boba Fett: We have this thing about — it's kind of a joke about this guy named Fishboy.

Luke Skywalker: In school?

Boba Fett: Yes. It's in school, and it's everywhere. I had this fish in the aquarium, and its name was Fishboy. My sister named it.

Luke Skywalker: How old was she when she named it?

Boba Fett: I don't know. I think she was 10 or something.

Luke Skywalker: Sounds like a name a 10-year-old might give a fish.

Boba Fett: He had a mate, and she got pregnant nine times. She got pregnant so many times that she died. *She had*, like, 30 babies. But I always joke about Fishboy, who, like, kills all his mates and everything, and all the stuff that he does, and then his friend is named Chicken Fingers, and he is very evil. And sometimes he comes back and he possesses us and — strange! *That's what we're like, though!*

Luke Skywalker: That sounds all right. I can see what you mean by kind of like an inside joke type thing, *'cause that makes very little sense to anybody else, eh?*

Boba Fett: I just have to say, "Hey, Fishboy!" and she turns around and gives me this evil look, and *no one else knows what we're talking about.*

The above are two examples of inside jokes that may be harmful to the persons on whom the jokes are based. This type of humor could be explained by the superiority theory, but it can be viewed differently by the other theorists. Some might ask 'Who are these inside jokes hurting?' To Levine (1977), humor development begins and increases throughout childhood as a sign of developing ego strength. He further suggests that individuals in emotional situations express feelings of mastery that may be used to gain control. There is also an interesting relationship between Boba Fett and her friend in the above passage. Could this form of humor increase cohesion between the two girls? When both girls are on the 'inside' of a joke that only they can understand, an increased sense of belonging would seem likely. Sharing a humorous experience that is characterized by a 'glint-in-the-eye' or knowing glance (Podilchak, 1992) can only happen when the people involved are in-the-know.

Boba Fett's Account of Stressful Life Events

This next section examines situations that Boba finds stressful. When I first

examined the transcripts I thought that there was little useable material, but on second, third and fourth read (Yoda's suggestion) I was surprised with what I found. For example, when I first asked Boba Fett what she did to 'kick back and relax a little' she stated that she gets together and talks with her friends. But with further probing look at what I uncovered. In this passage Boba both explained what she does to relieve stress, and also demonstrates a positive consequence of dealing with her stress.

Boba Fett: *I play drums.*

Luke Skywalker: Right. You said. Does that relieve stress?

Boba Fett: Yeah.

Luke Skywalker: I bet you it does!

Boba Fett: A lot of times also, when I feel stressed or my self-confidence feels low, I play soccer and work out or go for a run or something. That always makes me feel better.

Luke Skywalker: How does it do that?

Boba Fett: It just makes me feel more confident in myself so that I can deal with the stress.

Luke Skywalker: Even just thinking that you made a great soccer team, that's got to boost your confidence.

Boba Fett: That did a lot for me.

Boba Fett went on to talk about the difficulties she is having with her parents, social relationships, and schoolwork. The first indication that I had regarding the stress she experienced her parental relationship was when she jokingly stated that when she was younger she looked up to her parents more then she does now. Her egocentric behavior and her wish to be more independent might explain her joking about a stressful aspect of her relationship with her parents. Yet as I probed her further, I found that her recent drop in her school grades is also a stress for her.

Luke Skywalker: I think when I called to make a first appointment with you, you were having music lessons, and you're not taking any calls during music lessons. That tells me that that must be important to you. So tell me about a time when you've been kind of stressed out. Maybe for soccer tryouts, were you kind of stressed?

Boba Fett: Yeah. There's that, and school. Not the marks, really, but everything that's been going on at school with, like, social stuff, at the moment, and my marks just go. I just got a report card a while ago, and my marks were good, but I dropped from last term. So my parents are a little upset because I'm supposed to go up, and I'm stressed about that. Then, yeah, the tryouts and everything from school.

Luke Skywalker: It's stressful being a kid, eh?

Boba Fett: Yeah. So much.

Luke Skywalker: Some people don't think it is, though. They're like "oh, that's kid stuff." But it's hard being a teenager, I think. I'm just thinking, what kind of social stuff at school? Are there pressures to conform and be like other kids?

Boba Fett: Yeah, there's pressure that way, but I've kind of gotten over it. There's a little bit of that. There's a lot of that at my school, but I just care a little about that. But then there's the pressures of, like, who you're friends with, and all the friend stuff, then the guy stuff, and everything.

And when I probed even further...

Boba Fett: I guess. Hmm. For the past month or two, I've kind of been coasting in school. My marks are still honours, but I'm just coasting, I'm not going with anything, because in Science, I've had a sub for a month. He doesn't teach anything, so I don't do anything in there. He doesn't really give us homework. Everything else, we don't get homework, so my parents are kind of worried that I don't do anything in school. Then my teachers all wrote in my report card that I'm not paying attention, I need to focus, which was just great, 'cause then I was grounded last weekend because of that!

Luke Skywalker: What do you think that's attributed to? Why aren't you focusing?

Boba Fett: The people I'm hanging out with now.

Luke Skywalker: Do you think?

Boba Fett: Yeah. Hanging out with the wrong people at the moment, but that's just — I'm going out with this guy right now. His friends are not the best, because they all smoke, some of them do drugs — actually, most of them. Two of them are suspended from school right now because they pulled a knife on somebody.

Luke Skywalker: Oh, dear.

Boba Fett: Yeah. And he — I don't know where he is right now. I haven't talked to him for, like, 5 days because he's at one of their houses, and I don't know what they're doing. He can't call me. Then his best friend is in my class, so I always hang out with him in class. Then that's somehow how I'm not paying attention.

In the above section Boba told her story without the use of any humor or laughter. In my field notes I commented on how important and serious the topic was for her. It was my intention to follow up with her next week to see if the situation had changed. To my surprise during the next visit when I asked about her current situation she was jovial with her replies. What became increasingly apparent was the fact that Boba Fett attributes her poor grades and awkward situation to her parents and to her new social contacts. She laughed when the conversation turned toward her boyfriend and stated “I have to end it. There’s no point.” She further explained how her situation is stressing her out.

Boba Fett: I sort of am. It just kind of stresses me out ‘cause all my friends are pressuring me to forget about him. My parents [inaudible phrase], they don’t like it. I still like him, but I don’t want to get involved in all the [inaudible word], the stuff that he does.

Luke Skywalker: Like what?

Boba Fett: *He smokes.* That’s why we can’t do anything mostly, ‘cause he has no money and he won’t let me lend him anything.

Luke Skywalker: *‘Cause he spends it on cigarettes.*

Boba Fett: Yeah. And he’s not coming to school, and most of his friends have been expelled, and he’s going to get expelled, because you can’t miss that much school and not get expelled.

Where did this laughter come from? Initially I thought that it might be because she was laughing because I was. Did I provoke her laughter? After examining the transcriptions, I see that this is not the case, as I was being the attentive interviewer. My second thought was that we had developed rapport and were becoming increasingly more comfortable with each other. Could this have happened in the short time we have been together? Could this be it? Is her laughter a social phenomenon? If this is true, I offer two possible explanations. She might have laughed to ‘test’ my attitude toward her and her current stressful situation, or laughter may have occurred to make it possible for her to take a ‘risk’ in discussing this difficult situation.

Another example of Boba Fett's use of humor as a social act was evident in her recounting a frightful experience with her father on a sailing trip. Her laughter, as indicated by the use of italics, was sprinkled throughout the following exchange:

Boba Fett: I'm afraid that — one time, my dad took me out when it was really, really cold and he almost tipped the boat, and I was freezing to death, and *he thought it was funny, and it wasn't.*

Luke Skywalker: Why not?

Boba Fett: 'Cause my hands were blue and I had to trapeze. I had to hang off the side of the boat to make it not fall over. I was freezing and it was windy and it was raining. It was awful. I was wet.

Luke Skywalker: How old were you?

Boba Fett: I think, 12.

Luke Skywalker: Twelve? Do you laugh at it now, looking back?

Boba Fett: *No, I'm still afraid.* I know he'd do it to me again.

Luke Skywalker: Is your dad like that?

Boba Fett: *Yeah.*

Luke Skywalker: Does he like to play practical jokes and stuff on you?

Boba Fett: Yeah. He likes to toughen me up, is what he calls it.

Boba also might be laughing in the above passage as a way to 'put down' the whole experience. Poland (1990) describes a mature sense of humor as the ability to acknowledge struggles in one self and to be able to accept limits. Boba has, in a sense, 'mastered' the discomfort of her boating trip. Although it was not funny at the time, she is now able to laugh at her trapeze experience. In fact, the whole experience may, in fact, have toughened her up, although not in a way that either her father or she suspect. Perhaps Boba has become 'toughened up' to the pain she experienced with the boating trip and not to the actual experience of the trip itself.

Throughout the interviews with Boba Fett, it was clear that she made use of humor in various ways and for different reasons. She used it when she described the relationship she had with her mom and dad, dismissing her not being as hard-working as they would like her to be with a laugh. She used humor again when she talked about

herself, wanting to be different from others as if humor was a way of putting others in their place and herself in hers. Humor was also apparent in Boba Fett's account of her relationship with her best friend. By making fun of others she and her friend used humor as a means to show that they were connected and separate from others. When asked to think about stressful life events, humor was not evident in her reflections, especially when it came to talking about the problem she was having with her boyfriend. However, even that changed between interviews when the seriousness of the problem identified in the first interview was laughed away in the second one. While this laughter could have been an indication she was trying to make light of something over and done with, it could also have been an example of how humor is used as a means of putting stressful situations in perspective. By distancing oneself with humor, it becomes possible to accept a reality rather than becoming immobilized by it.

Han Solo

My next set of interviews was with Han Solo. After reading through the transcripts, several features became apparent. The first was Han Solo's relationship with her family and its playful nature; the second, was Han's use of humor as a lubricant, a means to ease both personal and social experiences of discomfort evidenced throughout the interviews, and the third was the stressful life event identified by Han with particular attention to how she made use of humor and the form it took.

Family Relationships

The importance of Han Solo's relationship with her family was demonstrated when Han's mom 'sat in' on our first interview. She assumed that it was OK to stay with Han and me. While this was not part of my research data collection plan, I was excited to

get an opportunity to observe their relationship. At one point during the interview they were discussing a recent trip that they had shared. They described their time together as “great.” Han laughed as she explained their shoe shopping experience in the United States, describing her mother as a “crazy” shopper. I got the sense that this was a special trip in that there were “no men” were allowed and this facilitated some quality one-on-one time.

Again I saw the same kind of playful relationship when Han described her father. When I questioned Han about how her father would describe her, she initially had difficulty developing a response and needed assistance from her mother. Han’s mother indicated that she thought her husband would say that Han had a good sense of humor. I further questioned Han about her father’s sense of humor:

Luke Skywalker: Does your dad have pretty good jokes?

Han Solo: No.

Luke Skywalker: They’re pretty bad?

Han Solo: *Yeah.*

Luke Skywalker: Does he screw them up? My mom cannot tell a joke. She’ll write it down — even if she has it in front of her, she still can’t present it properly. *Do you know what I mean?* Is he like that? But you laugh at them anyway?

Mom: Kind of cool. He makes something sort of off the cuff sort of.

Han Solo: Yeah. *“Octember” instead of “October.”*

Mom: He scrambles his words around on purpose.

Han Solo: When you say “I’m full,” he says, “I’m Dad.”

Luke Skywalker: Why do you think he does that?

Han Solo: Make us laugh, keep us happy.

When asked about her relationship with her brother, Han laughed and said he might find her “a little annoying.” She went on to describe how she enjoys ‘bugging’ her brother when she is bored.

Han Solo: He thinks it’s annoying when I play my piano really loud in the morning when he’s trying to sleep.

Mom: He doesn't like mornings.

Han Solo: Well, I don't like it when he plays his bagpipes at night when I'm trying to sleep. Those things are loud!

Luke Skywalker: So he might think you're pretty good at piano?

Han Solo: Better than he is!

This playful nature was characteristic of communication patterns in Han Solo's family. Why is this joking nature found with all three of Han's family members? What are the contributing factors? McGhee (1984) states that 'playful' play occurs early on in a child's development and it becomes humorous when there is an incongruous component attached to the play. A good example of this would be Dad's jokes regarding being "full." According to Han's account, humor is a common occurrence in her family's interactions, and with their father in particular. Rosenbaum and Carty (1996) observe the use of humor as an important tool in providing care for the adolescents, along with other themes like parents being able to 'be there,' listen in confidence, help, give gifts and demonstrate their love (Rosenbaum & Carty, 1996). Humor, as an indicator of care might be understood as a parent's ability to find the humor in a minor tragedy, minimize troubles, and to laugh at oneself. These abilities are consistent with Sybil and Steven Wolin's (1995b) views on humor and resiliency.

Another way to consider the humorous interaction between Han Solo and her parents is in terms of Han's developing independence. Santrock (1995) describes the adolescent's struggle for autonomy and independence as a difficult time for parents. There is a strong link, however, between the parent-child relationship and the adolescent's sense of well-being as well as the ability to function well in social situations (Santrock, 1995). Han did not describe any difficulties she is having with her parents, which might be explained by the fact that her mother was present for one of the

interviews. Given their use of humor and ability to tease each other, however, it is reasonable to assume their relationship is strong. Much like a 'roast' event where a well loved personality is publically teased, the blatant put down or sarcastic humor serves as the ultimate compliment that the person is indeed highly respected and loved; so much so that all who are present can make incredible, exaggerated observations that all who listen know them to be untrue.

Schuster and Ashburn (1992) describe three basic functions that a family serves which may never be replaced by the teen's peer group. The first function is a sense of closeness. Intimacy, trust, and emotional support characterize this sense. Han displayed this closeness when she allowed her mother to take part in her first interview. The second function is providing a model of adaptability. Here the parents provide the adolescent with information regarding power structures, role development and social relationships. This was obvious in the interviews with Han as she openly discussed her peer relationships and the difficulties she is having with her teachers and role in the family. The final function is one of communication. Parents provide their adolescent with the opportunity to learn speaking, listening and to develop negotiating skills. These skills have been linked to a high self esteem and improved psychosocial development (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992).

Parents also play an important role in humor development. Poland (1990) argues that often children come by their sense of humor 'naturally.' By setting an 'example' parents allow for the child to express their sense of humor both as a learned behavior and as a product of their experiences. Imagining a family that often jokes and teases at the dinner table, in time the children will learn that this is acceptable behavior within an

acceptable context.

Humor and Laughter as a Personal and Social Lubricant

Just as humor can serve many functions, there are several possible explanations as to why Han laughed when she did. Humor can be used as a ‘social lubricant’ to ease social interactions and to make them more enjoyable (McGhee, 1989). Similarly, I also used humor during the interviews to make the participant more comfortable and our discussion became more relaxed and enjoyable. My intention in using humor was to make Han feel accepted when she had difficulty answering my questions. Han possibly used humor to share information that might have been embarrassing or difficult to disclose. One example of this is when she remembered a time of being an incompetent bowler:

Han Solo: Okay. When was I crazy? Like, at birthday parties. Sue’s birthday party when we were *bowling*. *I’m so bad at bowling! I threw the ball into the other lane! It took down the pin that my other friend had missed! It was so funny. She says, “Thank you”!*

Luke Skywalker: She got them all down then, like a strike, because you bowled across six lanes?

Han Solo: *It was funny!*

In keeping with this thought, Han’s repeated responses of ‘I don’t know’ at different times in the interview could possibly have meant our discussion was touching on sensitive areas for Han. Han’s use of laughter at those times may have been a personal lubricant, an attempt to ‘save face.’ Considering the notion that we are all ‘God’s fools,’ Han’s laughter may have been an indication that embarrassment is an inevitable fate of being human (Mindness, 1987).

Han Solo’s Account of a Stressful Life Event

At the beginning of the second interview Han Solo told me that the previous day

her grandpa was admitted to the hospital. I thought to myself that here might be a self-defined stressful life event!! My field notes indicate that I thought at this point that I must be very careful with my questions so that her story would emerge. Following is the excerpt showing how I tried to do this:

Han Solo: I don't know. My grandpa had a blot clot or something yesterday, so they took him actually to the hospital, and they're doing surgery to open his artery wider so that it can keep moving.

Luke Skywalker: Jeepers! That's something new!

Han Solo: Scary, yeah.

Luke Skywalker: So what happened? Tell me the story. And which unit is he on at the hospital? Do you know?

Han hesitated as I finished my last question. Unsure if it was my interview technique or the fact that I asked three questions at once, I tried again, with another approach.

Luke Skywalker: Okay. Well, tell me the story. Give me the story. What happened?

Han Solo: Yesterday, we were going to go over there for coffee, because we always go to my grandma's house for coffee and cookies or to watch TV and stuff. So my mom called just to let my grandma know we were going to go over there, and she said that my grandpa was complaining that he had some pain in his chest — he'd been working in the garden — and she thought it was a heart attack or something. My mom was all cool. *She wasn't worried or anything.* She wasn't in any big hurry because she isn't really in a big hurry. Then we went over there. My grandpa was lying down when we got there, and she just took him and my grandma to the hospital. Me and my brother stayed there and answered the phone and called people to tell them that he went to the hospital.

"Better I thought to myself. Now where do I go from here? How do I let Han tell her story?" I waited quietly instead of asking her to tell me more. Han then described how she thought the whole situation was "kind of scary." I tried to redirect Han to talk about her experience with her ill grandpa. After a little more probing she then admitted

she “wasn’t that scared.” Throughout this part of our discussion there was no use of humor. I tried to probe Han to tell me how she dealt with the stresses of the day. She indicated that she did not feel stressed because her mother was so calm. I then asked her how she felt her mother was coping with the stress of having to bring her father to the hospital. Laughter only came into play when Han was discussing how calm her mother was and how she “wasn’t worried or anything.” She also laughed when we discussed how her mother dealt with the stresses of the day.

This display of humor might possibly be explained by a social theory. Perhaps her laughter here was an effort to make light of the situation, or because she felt that her mother’s reactions to the situation were abnormal and therefore funny. This made me wonder if the reason that Han wasn’t “freaking out” was because the people around her were not ‘getting hysterical’. There are other possible explanations for Han’s laughter during this part of our interviews. Could Han’s use of humor in this situation be used as a mechanism to re-gain control of her situation? Mindess (1987), describes the use of humor as a form of social power, in that individuals are able to ‘take a step back’ from their situation and achieve some form of detachment. This in turn, gives one a sense of being in control rather than being controlled by a particular situation. “From that perspective, the core of the onion still makes us cry, but almost everything else contains seeds of laughter” (Mindess, 1987, p. 93).

My hope was that if I asked Han about how her mother deals with stress, it might elicit some self-reflection on her behalf.

Han Solo: My mom had breast cancer, I think, and she had chemotherapy and radiation for that. She’s much better now.

Luke Skywalker: That’s kind of scary, too, eh? How long ago was that?

Han Solo: I think just this Christmas she was having the radiation.

Luke Skywalker: That's kind of stressful, too, eh? Did you do anything to help yourself when you were stressed out?

Han Solo: I wasn't really stressed out. It didn't seem that bad. No one else was really freaking out.

On several occasions Han's reply to my questions was "I don't know." When this did not occur, I tried to probe even further. I then asked Han about how she thinks her friends deal with stress. Again I got the same reply four different times... "I don't know." I tried again to direct the discussion back to how she dealt with the stress of her grandpa being ill. This is a section of that discussion.

Luke Skywalker: And how about you? We discussed this, I think, last time. You can't even think of a time when you've been really stressed out for me, can you! Or when you had a little crisis or something?

Han Solo: I don't know.

Luke Skywalker: Think really hard for me! I think we talked a couple of weeks ago about how you feel. Sometimes school stresses you out and French stresses you out, eh?

Han Solo: Yeah.

Luke Skywalker: Anything else. How about — oh, I don't know.

Han Solo: *I don't know!*

Luke Skywalker: You don't know. How do you think you would deal with something that was very, very stressful?

Han Solo: Depending on what it was ... I don't know!

Clearly, I was having difficulties with this interview. My 'teasing' her about not being able to recall any stress in her life obviously did not work. I employed techniques that I thought were important to an active discussion. I re-read the transcripts and looked for open-ended questions for which there were many. Perhaps the areas we were discussing may have been too sensitive for Han to discuss. Perhaps the incident with her grandpa and even her mother were too recent, and there was not adequate time for Han to process the situation, let alone laugh or find some humor in it. Looking back, another interview with Han would have been appropriate to look for consistency in her

description of the situation, as well as to further explore of her emotions at the time. As for achieving data saturation, I was far from it at this point. Polit and Hungler (1995) indicate that the data is saturated when the researcher reaches a sense of closure when no new information is obtained with further interviews. In this case it is possible the participant truly “did not know.” When that happens there is little a researcher can do with the participant except to let it be. That is basically what I chose to do with Han at that point in time.

Throughout the interviews Han Solo made use of humor in various ways and for different reasons. For instance, she used humor when describing her playful relationship with her entire family. What became increasingly clear throughout the interviews was how important this aspect of Han’s life was to her. Remember the vacation she spent with her mother, the teasing relationship with her brother and the joking at the dinner table with her father? Han demonstrated her use of humor again when she described her bowling experience. This may have been Han’s attempt to use humor as a social lubricant or as an attempt to ‘save face’. When speaking about a stressful event in her life, Han made use of humor again. Perhaps this may be explained as an attempt to make light of the situation. However, her use of laughter could also be an attempt to put a stressful situation in perspective in order to gain some sense of control over it. I admittedly had difficulty with my interviews with Han Solo as on several occasions she replied “I don’t know” to many of my questions. I am left wondering if the topic of conversation was too sensitive for her to discuss? Perhaps my indirect approach to humor through conversations about stressful life events put too much emphasis on the stress that had been experienced?

C-3PO

The next interview I completed was with C-3PO. First impressions are always so important, and I was determined to put my best foot forward. I was surprised when C-3PO's grandmother and grandfather sat me down with a homemade pie to discuss my study. Putting my 'best foot forward' was seriously tested when a piece of peach pie somehow landed on the front of my shirt. I wish I could say that no one noticed but everyone did. We all had a good laugh and while I may not have put my best foot forward, my questionable skills in negotiating pie-to-mouth certainly put everyone at ease! When the pie was eaten, C-3PO's grandparents left and it was on to more serious business, the interview. After reading through the transcripts, two features were apparent. C-3PO had a significant sibling relationship where the act of "bugging" each other was expected. When it came to talking about stressful life events, C-3PO used no humor at all.

Sibling Relationship

Siblings can be an individual's first interaction with a peer group (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992) and play a crucial role in helping their brother/sister learn new skills and develop by providing "expert" advice. Sibling relationships can be task orientated i.e. cleaning the kitchen or more playful in nature i.e. "annoying" your sibling. C-3PO indicated that she thought that her relationship with her brother was appropriate because they are "supposed" to bug each other:

Luke Skywalker: What about your brother? How do you think he would describe you?

C-3PO: Annoying.

Luke Skywalker: *Annoying! Why's that?*

C-3PO: 'Cause I annoy him.

Luke Skywalker: *Do you bug him?*

C-3PO: Yeah, he bugs me.

Luke Skywalker: Why do you guys do that, do you think?

C-3PO: *'Cause we're brother and sister. That's what we're supposed to do.*

I would agree with C-3PO that siblings are “supposed” to bug each other. I remember annoying my sister when we were younger. Looking back I am unsure of my motive for this annoyance; it could be because I admired her greatly. Even now that we are older I have to wonder if our playful nature played a significant role in our level of closeness today.

In sibling relationships, however, there are always inequalities of social power. Santrock (1995) discusses at length the differences between first-born children, middle children and the youngest child. These differences in power reflect a familial hierarchy that keeps justice and order to the land. But what kind of humor is displayed in the above passage? Why do C-3PO and her brother “bug” each other? Is it for fun, or is it done to put each other in their place to regain the hierarchy of social power within the family context? When “bugging” is no longer done in fun and changes to sarcastic or put down humor it may be an attempt to display a superior position and reaffirm an inferior one (Podilchak, 1992).

C-3PO's Account of Stressful Life Events

On two occasions when C-3PO was describing stressful situations, it became apparent that she was becoming increasingly uncomfortable as I probed further. This was evidenced by her body language (i.e. shifting in her chair) as well as the tone of her voice, which changed from a calm even tone to quiet, hesitant responses. One occasion was when C-3PO discussed getting into a fight with her friends at school. She was angry that

she did not know the origins of the fight. Based on the following excerpt it appears that C-3PO dealt with the stress of the disagreement by dismissing it as inconsequential to her whole life and moving on:

Luke Skywalker: You like lunch hour, hanging with your friends. Do you have a best friend?

C-3PO: No, not any more. Me and my friends just got in this big fight.

Luke Skywalker: Why?

C-3PO: I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine.

Luke Skywalker: *Really?*

C-3PO: I came back from Hawaii, and they all hated me.

Luke Skywalker: Oh, no.

C-3PO: I really don't care, though. We've been in fights before, and I've made new friends.

Luke Skywalker: That's good. Are you not stressed out about it at all or anything? Were you stressed out when you came back initially and you're, like, what the heck's going on?

C-3PO: Yeah, the first couple of days, but then I said, who cares — move on with my life. My friends will come and go, but life's gonna still go on.

The second occasion when C-3PO's tone of voice changed was when we discussed how her primary care giver, her grandmother, had to be taken to the hospital. The situation was stressful to her because she was unsure as to the cause of her grandmother's illness. When asked how she dealt with this situation, C-3PO indicated that she spoke to her mother on the telephone a lot.

C-3PO: There's been times I've been stressed out just 'cause I haven't gotten enough sleep. Like this weekend. I was pretty stressed out 'cause I was getting up at 7 o'clock and going to bed at, like, midnight, 'cause I'd go see my grandma. On Saturday, I saw my grandma four times. Friday, I was really stretched out, cause I didn't know what was wrong with her until I got home.

Luke Skywalker: She wasn't feeling well.

C-3PO: My grandpa got me up at 6 o'clock in the morning and said, "We're taking your grandma to the hospital. Get ready." I'm, like, ahhh! 'Cause he didn't take me with them. He said get ready and I'll be back to pick you guys up to go to school. I was just, like, oh, no, this can't be good.

Luke Skywalker: So you went to school the whole day, not really knowing —

C-3PO: Yeah, and then at lunch, I called him, 'cause he had a cell phone, and he

was, like, “Oh, we don’t really know what it is, but all we know is it’s not a heart attack. They think it’s gallstones or something.” I don’t know. I was just, like, oh, no, oh, no. Then we saw her 5 minutes on Friday night, ‘cause she went in for surgery Friday night and we got there 5 minutes before she went. She was getting rolled into the surgery room. So we were just, like, oh, no. I really didn’t know what a gall bladder was or anything like that. I was, like, I don’t know what this is! Then my mom came up on Saturday to help, ‘cause my grandpa was so behind in his tax work. My grandma didn’t know how long she’d be in the hospital, because we had the Easter lunch coming and about 20 different people coming. I’m, like, ahhh! What are we going to do!

Luke Skywalker: That sounds very stressful. Well, what kind of stuff did you do to relieve stress in that situation?

C-3PO: I talked to my mom a lot.

During this entire exchange, no laughter or any attempt at using humor occurred.

So why did humor not occur in this situation? Perhaps, the experience was ‘just too fresh’ and perhaps too serious an event to make light of it in C-3PO’s mind. As with Han Solo, it is some sort of detachment to a situation that enables one to laugh at it. With C-3PO, the seriousness of her grandmother’s condition could not be put in humorous perspective at this point and may never be.

Like the two previous interviews, C-3PO demonstrated her use of humor when she described her ‘teasing’ relationship with her brother. She laughed as she reflected on the playful nature of their relationship. I suspect that the familial hierarchy was reaffirmed during the exchanges between brother and sister. When asked to reflect on a stressful life event, humor was not evident in her reflections. Like the other participants who talked about stressful life events with little or no humor, perhaps the situation was too serious and possibly something that might never be viewed through humor.

R2-D2

R2-D2 was the next interview that I completed. After examining the interview

transcripts, some pretty interesting material was apparent. R2-D2 used humor to make fun-of himself as well as to make fun-of others. R2-D2 also described some events that he found stressful in the following section.

Self-Depreciation Humor as Self-Acceptance

Throughout the interview R2-D2 often made jokes about himself and his situation. In all of my interviews I asked the participants how they would describe themselves at various points in their lives. When I asked R2-D2 how he would describe himself at age five, he indicated that he thought he was a “geek” and proceeded to give reasons as to why. For example, R2-D2 described, how when he moved to Canada, he had different clothing than the other kids and he didn't “fit-in!” Later on when I asked how he would describe himself at age ten he stated that he was still a “geek.” While R2-D2's humor was self-depreciating in form, he used it with a sense of confidence on his behalf. R2-D2 appeared to be comfortable with the fact that he was not like his peers when he moved to Canada as a child. Could this be a sensitive area for R2-D2 and the reason why he tries to make light of his situation? Or, is it that R2-D2 has totally accepted that he was looked at differently by his peer group when he moved to Canada and can make fun of it now from a position of security? Or perhaps R2-D2 makes fun of himself because he recognized and accepted the social inequalities between himself and his classmates.

Humor as Making Fun-of Others

The third theme in R2-D2's interviews is his use of fun-of humor. Podilchak (1992) describes this type of humor “reflects, through the expression of laughter, the social inequalities of the participants' relative social power” (p. 2). Although this type of

humor use was not related to any discussion regarding a self-defined stress, R2-D2 used fun-of humor three times. Consider R2-D2's description of an incident when he was making fun-of a friend in church.

R2-D2: We always think he's kind of a fruit and stuff, 'cause he wears pink glasses and he asked one of my friends what kind of shampoo she used, and I was, like — but he's a really nice guy, and me and Sid always make fun of him, but not to his face, but — it's kind of bad, 'cause he's a really nice guy. Just making fun of people.

Luke Skywalker: Think it's okay to make fun of some people behind their back?

R2-D2: *As long as they don't hear about it!*

Humor as an expression of superiority might help us understand such situations.

It might have been helpful to have explored with R2-D2 his feelings when making fun of his friend at church. Perhaps he might have expressed feelings of enhanced self esteem or an increase in inner strength as postulated by Hobbes' and Aristotle. Was R2-D2's account of making fun of his friend due to his feeling smarter or more fortunate than his friend?

A final theme in my interviews with R2-D2 related to a situation where R2-D2 and his friends were playing tricks on R2-D2's neighbors. A common trick he and his friends often played was 'ring and run.' While R2-D2 claimed he "knows it is wrong," he went along with the game because he was afraid that his friends would call him a "chicken" if he did not. The risk involved in playing this game was over shadowed by the excitement of not getting caught. A successful attempt would eventually find release through tension-reducing laughter. Another way to understand this game is that it is a fun-of form of humor (Podilchak, 1992). Fooling the neighbors in such a way could actually be experienced as a way of outwitting the neighbors and hence, gaining some sense of superiority over them. In the world of adolescence, the quest for mastery and

hence, superiority is great. On the other hand R2-D2's friends could make him feel badly for not playing the game by calling him names. By asserting themselves in a superior role through the use of sarcastic humor, they in turn used a superiority-based humor form to exert control over R2-D2. And R2-D2 who wanted to be accepted, to be their peer, complied. This need for acceptance was more powerful than his fear of parental censure. Even though he stated that he is trying to build a trusting relationship with his parents, and that he realizes there would be consequences for his actions, he still plays the games because of peer pressure.

R2-D2's Account of a Stressful Life Event

Twice during our interviews R2-D2 described self-defined stressful life events. One had to do with R2-D2 being worried about his cat when the family got a new dog. When questioned further, R2-D2 talked about the dog getting into a lot of trouble at home, and destroying some of R2-D2's belongings which made R2-D2 angry:

R2-D2: My dog really *stresses me out*. I know it's kind of funny, but Melvin, he's really old, and he's kind of sick. You saw the big cut on his arm, eh?

Luke Skywalker: I didn't see. The cat?

R2-D2: Yeah, Melvin. He was really sick, and he doesn't like dogs. He was getting used to them. I didn't want to get a dog, because I didn't want Melvin to go crazy and stuff, 'cause I really like Melvin. We finally did get a dog, and I didn't want one. I was totally against it. I was, like, "No, we're not going to get a dog." Then finally we did. The dog, he's only a puppy. He doesn't understand things. For one thing, we have a dog. That stresses me out, because we have Melvin as well. But also, he also chomps on your hand and bites everything.

In the above section R2-D2 admits that he finds it amusing that his "dog stresses him out." This type of humorous expression demonstrates a sort of nonsensical humor in that he recognizes the silliness of his statement that provoked laughter on both of our behaves. And yet in that nonsensical humor is a note of a seriousness; a concern for a

vulnerable, older pet in the pathway of an energetic, unpredictable puppy. Humor in this instance could also be a case of covering up and protecting something which is precious.

Later still in the interview, R2-D2 described a situation at school where a girl had made him upset. After he returned home from school he drew a “humungous evil face” on his wall “with things coming out of the eyes, like blood and stuff.” When I questioned R2-D2 further he indicated that he behaved that way because he was stressed out. Then he changed the subject. I wonder if R2-D2 was embarrassed at his behavior? While he did not laugh or use humor to cover up his embarrassment he did exaggerate saying that he was “totally crazy” at the time.

Throughout the interviews with R2-D2, he used various forms of humor which in turn served various functions for him as he spoke with me. He made fun-of himself in a way that suggested he was more self-accepting than self-deprecating when at a younger age, he described himself as a “geek.” Another form of fun-of humor directed at others was demonstrated when R2-D2 described playing ‘ring and run’ with his friends. Perhaps this form of humor was a way to prove that he could handle peer pressure to conform or as a means to test his ability to make fun-of adults who were in a stage he had yet to master. Perhaps such humor makes the transition seem more manageable in some way. When asked to think about a stressful life event R2-D2 laughed as he described how his dog really “stressed him out”. Here was an example where humor might be a way of hiding the seriousness of the situation for R2-D2.

Chewbacca and Jabba the Hutt

The last set of interviews that I completed was with a sister and brother Chewbacca and Jabba the Hutt. It was challenging to analyze these transcripts as so

much rich important information was shared with me. Unlike my previous interviews, I sat down with both Jabba and Chewbacca at the same time. I am unclear now as to the intent of this change in technique. This was interesting, as I had to ask the same questions to both participants. This strategy may have, in retrospect, proved to uncover more ‘rich’ data as the participants were able to discuss the questions together, and even have more time to formulate a response while the other was talking. For whatever the reason, I quite enjoyed my time spent with these two participants.

Sibling Relationships

Like other participants, Chewbacca and Jabba described having a caring sibling relationship. Both Chewbacca and Jabba stated that the other was their best friend. This relationship appears to be particularly strong with these two participants because they have “gone through a lot together,” and this has made them “closer than ever.” As well, they demonstrated a playful relationship with each other. For instance, Jabba joked with Chewbacca about her control “issues” which Chewbacca admitted having! This teasing relationship was evident throughout the interview. When either Chewbacca or Jabba the Hutt spoke about the other they looked at one another and shared special moments evidenced by knowing glances and winks.

Luke Skywalker: So how would you describe Chewbacca?

Jabba the Hutt: She’s an awesome sister.

Luke Skywalker: *Is she?*

Jabba the Hutt: Yeah. We’re best friends. She’s really kind and caring. She’s always nice to everyone. She’s equal to everyone. She’s a bit of a *control freak, but that’s cool*. She doesn’t really put up with any garbage. Other than that, I don’t know.

In her unwillingness to “put up with any garbage,” Chewbacca might come across as a “control freak” but to Jabba this was an admirable quality. Hence, it was something

about which he could make fun-of and not hurt Chewbacca's feelings.

Chewbacca: Egocentrism

Twice during the interview I found evidence of egocentric behavior by Chewbacca. Egocentrism is characterized by attention seeking behavior, and the desire to be noticed and visible (Santrock, 1995). Chewbacca described two situations to me where it was important for her to be noticed and in the foreground.

Chewbacca: I still had the same sort of fear that I still have now. I used to be — it's a silly thing, but I remember ... once when I was 5 or so, at a Christmas concert, we were in a big singing thing, and I don't know, maybe I wasn't getting enough attention or something, but I pulled my *skirt over my head and started running around, and of course, everyone laughed*, so I kept on doing it. I probably ruined the Christmas concert. I mean, I still have those funny little mischievous ideas, even though now I know *that I shouldn't do them*, I still think about them. That's why —

Luke Skywalker: Why do you think you do them, and why do you think you shouldn't do?

Chewbacca: I don't know. Some of them, I'll do, but I know my limits, because I don't want to ruin it for everyone else, kind of thing.

Luke Skywalker: Now that you're 16, you don't want to be pulling your skirt up over your head!

Chewbacca: *Not really, no*, but I still have those little things. I —

Luke Skywalker: Impulses?

Chewbacca: Yeah. I'm not sure why I did it. Maybe — I hate — I can deal with it, but I don't like being in the *background*. Like when I was in a play or something, I like to at least have some lines or some songs, something I can do to be more than just the *chorus or something*. That could have been something why I did it. As soon as people laughed, that's probably why I kept on doing it, just 'cause I like *it* when people laugh and stuff.

This excerpt demonstrates Chewbacca's egocentrism as she admitted that she doesn't like to be in the "background," and also enjoys making people laugh. Is it possible that Chewbacca enjoys making people laugh to gain approval from them? Is laughter a reward for a well executed humorous event? For Chewbacca the laughter produced might indicate approval from her peers. Although her use of humor use here is

not in the context of a self-defined stressful life event, this does demonstrate that humor plays an important role in her life.

Social Health and Humor

Throughout all of the interviews with the participants it became clear that the social aspects of humor were important. Such functions as laughter to cover up nervousness, make others feel at ease, fill in gaps, and generally make the conversation more enjoyable were observed. Chewbacca and Jabba the Hutt confirm what theorists have said about the social function of humor. Following Chewbacca's description of how she got attention, Jabba claimed to do the same thing.

Jabba the Hutt: I think I do things like that, too. I like making people laugh. Like you said, you like to be someone there, right?

Luke Skywalker: Why do you think that's important — laughing? Why do you do it?

Jabba the Hutt: I think it makes people happy. You can really talk to people. I always, like, make jokes and stuff, and not just dumb jokes. I sort of do things related to [word] and stuff. Just making people laugh makes me feel so good, to see their faces. It makes them open up.

Chewbacca: If somebody's laughing, then you know that they're sort of pleased with whatever you're doing, and that gives you some confidence back, and then you have more energy to keep doing it, and it cycles, sort of.

Luke Skywalker: Sure! Jabba the Hutt raised a good point: he said it opened them up a little bit, and we'll talk a little bit about *that*, and then I thought of something else to say about that. So you think that you open people up?

Chewbacca: I don't know. At first, I'll come up to someone and I'll talk to them and I'm not really sure. What I usually do is if I'm in a group or something, sitting with a whole bunch of people, then I do something makes everyone laugh, and then we can start — you feel more like you know them.

Luke Skywalker: That's kind of the ice-breaker, don't you think?

Jabba the Hutt: Yeah, and then they open up and then you can say whatever you want.

Chewbacca: I know that if I don't really know somebody, I'll just go up — I always just say whatever I think. I don't actually think of what to say *before* I say stuff. I'll just go up to someone — I did this a couple of days ago, a few weeks ago — I go up to someone, I'll be, like, "That's a nice shirt. My friend has that shirt," with some stranger, "Yeah, my friend has

that shirt, *blah blah blah*, they'll be, like, "You don't care, why am I telling you this," but then they'll think it's sort of funny that I come up to them, then they'll start chatting with you 'cause you've exposed yourself by saying something weird or doing something like that, and they find that funny and they'll open up to you, too.

Luke Skywalker: *What happens if they don't find it funny? THEN what do you do?*

Chewbacca: Then you're just, like, "Yeah, well, anyway."

Jabba the Hutt: It lets you find out if they're, like, a good person or not.

Chewbacca: You also sort of — I don't mind that much if people are kind of — like, if they're weird. I don't care. I'm fine with what I'm doing, so if they're not, that's fine. I'll just walk away and be friends with *someone else*.

Jabba the Hutt: I find that if some people don't laugh, they're either trying to be like — or if they don't try and be funny or don't want to talk to you or anything, then they're either trying to really cool and you're, like, "*Yeah, whatever,*" or they're scared and shy and a geek or something.

Chewbacca: Or they're just scared to talk to someone they don't know. Like, what you're doing, you're able to expose yourself like that, and they're not, they kind of might get a little shy of that.

In the above passages Jabba and Chewbacca describe several social functions of humor that are consistent with the theorists. Jabba described one of the important functions of humor as the ability to make people "feel so good" and further stated that it makes "them open up." For Jabba opportunities to laugh with others provides an invitation from further interaction. McGhee (1989) states that often humor used in social situations may be an attempt to examine another person's attitudes, motives and values. This form of 'social probing' was demonstrated in Jabba's comment about finding out if "they're a good person or not."

Chewbacca demonstrated another function of social humor when she described what she would do if a group did not find her attempts to initiate a conversation "funny." She indicated that she would say "Yeah, well, anyway." Should Chewbacca's attempt to put the group at ease be unsuccessful, her sense of humor would allow her to avoid a

potentially embarrassing situation for herself. Jabba further elaborated to support this theory suggesting that another reason for people not laughing may be due to their own insecurities.

So at this point I am asking myself, what is the significance of this section? The participants used social forms of humor in their discussion. So what does this mean? This form of humor is an example of what I have decided to call ‘humor health.’ This is defined as the ability for an individual to explore their own sense of humor, to identify their humor use a serving a purpose or function, and therefore increasing the possibility of reoccurrence. While initially these participants perhaps unwittingly used social forms of humor to serve a purpose or function. After some discussion with me, they actually identified how humor was useful in putting people at ease. This demonstrates remarkable self-insight on their part. I would suggest that these sorts of social qualities have developed over time during adolescence and have ultimately contributed to their ‘humor health.’

Fun-of, Funny and In-Fun Humor

A review of Jabba and Chewbacca’s transcripts suggest they used two forms of fun-of humor. The first is, as Podilchak (1992) explains, when laughter is directed at someone else. The second is when individuals makes fun-of themselves. Jabba and Chewbacca tried to explain their version of fun-of humor and how it serves a particular function for them.

Jabba the Hutt: It’s fun to make fun of people *sometimes, too*, except I never do it right in front of someone’s face or with someone that they’re close to. Only with your good friends that actually think the same thing. There’s this one girl that we went on a school ski trip with, and I don’t know if she’s got some mental problems or something. Her name’s Cynthia

Smith, and when we went on the ski trip, she went up the mountain the first day, and came down a double black diamond. She can barely *snowboard*, so she ended up walking the whole way down the mountain, and she held our bus up an hour. So then we were, okay, and the teachers were, “You better not do that tomorrow when we go to another mountain.” So she does the same thing, and they pulled her down off the mountain, and said, “You’re not going up again, ‘cause you do the same thing. We warned you.” So all the way home, I felt kind of bad for her, but she brought it on herself. She’s like, “I found my Smarties,” and everyone’s, like, “*Yeah, Smith!*” Every time we see her in the hallways, we’re, like, “*Yeah, Smith!*” and she’s like, *grrrr*, she gets all mad at us, with the people that were there, and it’s hilarious. I like to make fun of people, but not in front of their faces. I think that’s okay.

Luke Skywalker: Why do you think that’s okay? How does it make you feel, I guess?

Jabba the Hutt: I wouldn’t necessarily say it’s *okay*, but —

Chewbacca: I think it’s sort of like — it depends. If it’s something that they know, too, if it’s one of those things where everyone kind of knows it and it’s something you accept about yourself, you also, then it’s sort of fun to make fun of it. Other ways, when someone’s obviously really, really strange, I guess it’s sort of — in a way, it helps you to sort of reassure each other that, “*We’re normal. See? Look at that!*”

Luke Skywalker: “*We’re all normal, ‘cause look at that!*”

Chewbacca: *Exactly!* If you’re walking along and you’re, “Oh, my God! WHAT is that person wearing!” it sort of gives you a chance to say, “If I can say that about that person, it must be because I am normal,” or something. I don’t know why. I guess it’s just as long as it’s not hurting anyone directly to them, it’s almost just like nature to do it. You can’t —

In the above section, Jabba the Hutt explained how he and his friends tease a girl in their class. I wonder why it is, that initially in our discussion, Jabba indicated that he would never tease anyone to their face, but later on, indicated that he in fact, had? Further, both Chewbacca and Jabba indicated that they both feel a sense of being “normal” when they are able to look at another and find something to tease. This might reflect what Podilchak (1992) means about fun-of humor as an attempt to affirm an inferior social position of another, much like what is addressed by the superiority theory of humor.

Poland (1990) argues that being able to laugh at oneself reflects a regard for oneself and an understanding of one's limits. He further states that this form of humor is based on self-strength and recognition of self and others. Mindess (1987) states that this "God's-eye view" allows us to not question "whether we should laugh at the very essence of our lives, but how much of ourselves we should laugh at" (p. 92). Chewbacca's ability to laugh at herself is perhaps an indication of this. She accepts she has a "control issue" and in doing so, laughs the characteristic away as something that 'just is.' In the same way, she is making fun-of herself possibly because she accepts that part of herself.

Funny humor (Podilchak, 1992) where the inequalities in social power are both acknowledged through laughter as a reality and left unchallenged was evident when Chewbacca said the following:

Chewbacca: Yeah, I'm nodding. *Obviously, the tape can't see me nodding, so I'll just talk.* Yeah, I get sort of stressed out. For the usual, small stresses, like schoolwork and stuff like that. Then, not often, but the odd time, there'll be a really big thing that I really have trouble handling, but that's just sort of randomly.

In the above example, I asked Chewbacca a question and her response was a non-verbal nod. Then realizing that the audiotape would not be able to identify her response she joked about its presence as a reality to which she would obviously have to adapt.

In-fun humor, the third form of humor is an amusing situation that is shared between two people who share an equal social bond at a particular moment and in a particular set of circumstances (Podilchak, 1992). The type of humor demonstrated by recognizing glances and accepting stares, was a part of the following exchange:

Chewbacca: *I like this now! I like being asked questions!*
 Luke Skywalker: *Do you? If only I could think of them!*

In this example, Chewbacca and I shared a laugh when she expressed her enjoyment over “being asked questions.” This may have be considered an example of funny humor, yet with my response it felt as if we were equal with each other at that moment. In essence, we were having fun, we were using humor in-fun. Ultimately, this feeling of being in-fun is something that must be identified by those involved in the interaction.

Chewbacca and Jabba’s Account of Stressful Life Events

Throughout the interviews both participants spoke of having stress in their lives. Unlike other participants Chewbacca admitted that stress often increases her productivity and therefore makes her work harder. She also indicated that when it gets too much for her to handle she tries to get ‘organized’ and makes a chart of a list to “put it all into perspective.” Jabba the Hutt on the other hand stated that when stress is too overwhelming he takes the dog for a walk or hangs with his friends.

In an attempt to examine Chewbacca’s coping methods in dealing with stressful events, I inquired about a death in her family. She explained how she was told about the death at school. Chewbacca further elaborated that her friends all deal with stress in a different ways. She speculated that it is important to learn from stressful situations because they create opportunities for gaining knowledge that you didn’t have before. Chewbacca had no stories about using humor as a means of coping with stress in her life. Nor did humor come through in her explanation of stressful events in her life. She did indicate, however, that “deep emotional support” is not always the answer and that laughing with her friends and hanging out is helpful as well.

Chewbacca: It was interesting, ‘cause all my friends handled it in different ways. I remember at school, our guidance counselor came up to me and told me right there, at school, so I remember, I started crying. My best friend knew

what was exactly wrong, just before I told her anything, so she was really supportive in more of a deep way. Then my friend, Adam, ran to the bathroom because he can't handle it when people cry. Some of them tried to make me laugh, some of them — they all handled it in really different ways, but all ways were really sort of helpful.

Luke Skywalker: Is there any way that you thought was the most helpful?

Chewbacca: I needed all of them in order to get back on my feet. I think if I could just have one, I'd probably have what my best friend was giving me —

Luke Skywalker: The deep kind of emotional support.

Chewbacca: Yeah, 'cause that's how deep you have to go to get at that kind of stuff. But too much of that's too much, too, so it was helpful to have my friends who were just there to hang out and laugh like we always do.

Luke Skywalker: Was it good when it was life just as usual, like when things got back to normal and it was just a feeling of being normal again and nothing really stressing you out?

Chewbacca: It was nice to be — I don't know. I like it when you're back to that point where you know it'll never be normal, back to the same way, but you've sort of learned something from it and you know something now that you didn't know before, and you sort of — I don't know. You've just moved on a little bit, and I love that. Yeah, that was really neat.

When Jabba the Hutt discussed the divorce of his parents he reflected that this was a stressful time. Again, there was no evidence of humor use in his discussion with me. He did, however, indicate that he did learn ways to deal with stress from his mother. Parents often provide support in stressful situations, and aid in developing skills and providing resources for dealing with the stressful event (Santrock, 1995).

Jabba the Hutt: When they first split up, I was okay with that. But then later, I found I was really get stressed out about everything, and almost depressed, and it wasn't because of my parents at all. It was just that I felt that things weren't working much. My friends at school, the slightest things, everything made me feel guilty, or you feel like you're all alone and stuff like that. It didn't take too long before I came out of that. Actually, my mom taught me tons of good things. She taught me so much about sticking up for yourself and how to deal with stress and time and everything like that, and that helped me a lot. Pretty much with her help, I just picked myself right up out of that. It's just, like, everything's awesome, better than before.

Throughout the interviews with Jabba the Hut and Chewbacca their use of humor both in form and function was evident. Like other participants, the close family relationship was central to their family dynamics. The teasing relationship that this brother and sister experience felt as if it was being done in-fun to me as an outsider. Chewbacca demonstrated egocentric behavior twice during the interviews when she described her need to be in the foreground and her reflection of an event that happened during a Christmas concert. Both Jabba the Hut and Chewbacca described the importance of humor in their social interactions for putting others at ease and relaxing them a little. Some forms of fun-of humor were also apparent in their interviews with me when both gave examples of making fun of others and of themselves. Like R2-D2 the superiority theory was central when discussing making fun-of others, and equal social power was the central theme when they discussed making fun-of each other. When asked about a stressful life event, Jabba the Hut and Chewbacca identified the divorce of their parents. Neither one used humor when speaking about this life event, possibly again because it was something that was too serious in their lives to make light about particularly in an interview with me.

Chapter 4

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE JOURNEY

In the movie the Empire Strikes Back the title character learns that his father is his arch nemesis, Darth Vader. For Luke, his search for the answers to his question was over. I wish I could say the same about the questions that stimulated my taking this journey. My intent was to explore the place of humorous expression in the life stories of adolescents who have experienced a self-defined stressful life event. Did I find the answer? Is Coca-Cola ‘green eyed’ after examining my study? In a word, “No!” (although the CEO for Coca-Cola was unavailable for comment).

That being said, let me explain. Humor found its way into each of the interviews I had with my study participants. It varied in form and served different functions. At times it was initiated by me while at others, by the participants being interviewed. As the interviews progressed, it became increasingly evident that little, if any, humor was used to discuss stressful life events. Humorous expressions and laughter, however, were a part of the discourse generated in my interviews with the six adolescents in my study. Before discussing the forms and reasons for these humorous experiences, first let me tell you about the challenges I now appreciate about studying humor.

Challenges in Studying Humor

I had little experience in studying humor, or shall I say no experience with studying humor. So I listened to Yoda and tried to learn from her experiences like any good protégé would. Yet, was I really listening? In my literature review, I described humor as cosmic and intangible, but I should probably add elusive, as well. I am an amateur Jedi Knight with poorly developed intuition skills. The process of interviewing

was difficult partially because I was so green (no reference to Yoda here) but also because I had difficulty ‘getting to the heart’ of what I was hoping to uncover.

I wonder if my interview technique could have been refined further with better probing questions. Would the participant’s amount of self reflection be increase with more direction? What seemed like straightforward questioning was met often with partial answers or “I don’t know!” A more direct approach with clearer probing questions may have facilitated my interview process.

Beer (1997) describes an number of ways to facilitate interviews. The interviewer must first develop a relationship with the participants and be “grounded enough” to understand where the participant is coming from. This is not an east task with the population that I selected. Every adolescents’ experiences are unique, even communication styles were a challenge as on many occasions I had to clarify what a participant meant by a particular statement. A rapport must also be built so that the participants would feel comfortable to speak their mind, clarify miscommunications and keep the conversation moving. Considering the short time that I spent with these participants, I am unsure if a true working rapport was achieved. With my experience at the group home, I did have an opportunity to spend a great deal of time with the potential participants. When I approached the local church group the volunteers were so keen and enthusiastic perhaps I missed the whole rapport building phase. Would a stronger rapport have made a difference?

In a study by Purcell, Hergenroeder, Kozinetz, Smith and Hill (1997) privacy and confidentiality were of the utmost concern to adolescents in discussing sensitive topics. I did not review the consent form with the participants prior to beginning the interviews,

nor did I ensure that the setting for the interview was completely private. Did this effect how the participants responded to questions? Was privacy and confidentiality a concern with the participant when I interviewed them with their mother\ sister\ brother in the room? Although the participants in these situations consented to having another person in the room, and further stated that their relationship was a close one, would their responses have been different?

There are other factors that may have influenced my research findings. Another suggestion is what I like to call the ‘white coat syndrome.’ In this situation a man enters a doctor’s office and when the doctor examines his blood pressure he notes that it is elevated. Now, does this patient have an increased blood pressure all the time, or, could there be another explanation? (i.e, he is worried that the doctor might uncover a serious illness/ailment.) Boman (1996) describes this as a dilemma in researching humor. To what extent can this contrived environment be compared to a naturally occurring humorous experience? Understanding that this might be a limitation of my study I offer this condolence.

In my study the many influences that contribute to humorous experiences were examined from a qualitative perspective. While this naturally means that no one influence was or should be controlled, my attempt to examine the humorous experiences of the adolescents who participated in my study no doubt influenced what I did and did not uncover. By my taking an active role in the interview process, my intentions influenced the participants to respond in certain ways. My attempt to examine their use of humor during their self-defined times of stress in their life outside of the context in which that humor did or did not happen proved to be less successful than I had hoped. In this study

the amount and quality of the data depended on my ability as a researcher to discover it (Morse & Field, 1995). I have spoken at length about trying to elicit responses from all the participants about stressful events in their lives to see if they talked about using humor as a coping strategy. This was more difficult than I had anticipated. Would I have gained more insight if I had built a deeper, more involved relationship with these adolescents? Would more humor have found its way into more relaxed and comfortable interviewing relationships? I did find that 'richer' data was achieved when I interviewed two participants at the same time. Chewbacca and Jabba the Hutt were able to build on each other's ideas and offer insight into each other's behaviors. I have to wonder if these findings would be similar if I had interviewed my participants as a focus group rather than as individuals? Would a social setting have been a better forum to examine my question of self-defined stressful life event? I don't have the answers to these questions and without further study exploring these different data collection methods, even Yoda cannot know the answers to such questions. Having acknowledged these challenges, just what have I learned about humor in the lives of the adolescents I interviewed?

Humor and Adolescent Development

To say that humor is important in adolescence for all the reasons presented in my literature review would be too easy. While humor theories have been developed in general with many recognizing the health-related benefits of a well-developed sense of humor, very little attention has been paid to the use of humor by adolescents. Given the developmental tasks of adolescence and the potential role that humor can play in helping an adolescent attempt and master those tasks, the place and role of humor in adolescent experiences might be an important consideration in promoting adolescent health.

Throughout the interviews with the adolescents three themes emerged. All but one participant identified a close connection between themselves and a family member. Remember Jabba and Chewbacca discussing their relationship as close? Stressful events were also identified and discussed by the participants. In all descriptions but one, there is no evidence of humor use or laughter. Finally, the third theme was the use of humor that did surface during the interviews.

These themes have been considered in terms of the developmental stage at which the adolescents in this study are situated. Erickson has identified Identity versus Role Confusion as the fifth stage of social-emotional development occurring at about the same time as adolescence (Schuster & Ashburn, 1992). In this stage all the experiences and past crises of the adolescent aid in the development of a unique identity. At the same time the adolescent struggles to move from learning the roles that are expected of children in our society such as being respectful and polite to the independence and freedoms associated with adulthood. In this stage, feelings of security traditionally associated with their parents begin to conflict with increasing needs to develop their own sense of independence. No longer only dependent on the rules set by their parents, adolescents look to others for guidance and support. Friends become increasingly important and new boundaries are tested through various activities, relationships and experiences. This stage can often lead to feelings of mastery in having completed certain tasks, but also confusion and disappointment associated with ‘bumps in the road’ on the way to mastery.

Like the Lightsaber Luke used for slaying the Storm Troopers, humor can be used as a tool for coping with the stress and uncertainties associated with new experiences. As

the adolescent experiments and makes mistakes, humor is a way out, a way to save face when new social, emotional and psychological roles are not always successfully negotiated. Humor can also be a sign that confusing life events and stressful experiences have been mastered. Remember Han Solo and her bowling alley incident? By laughing about the incident that at the time may have been embarrassing to her, she used humor to demonstrate she could also put it into perspective as something that could be laughed at, as something that posed no threat to who she was now nor to her sense of personal competency. Think back to Boba Fett's use of humor when she discussed her jokes about "Fishboy" and how making fun of such situations might have given her a sense of being superior and in control.

Humor Learned Through Life Experiences

Learning to use humor is a process that begins early in life. Children as young as four have been observed to use humor in a deliberate way. The user of humor is shaped through various experiences both positive and negative. Humor development can be influenced by an adolescent's parent, siblings, peers and media to mention a few. Remember Han Solo and her father's influence on family humor patterns? Han's father makes jokes at the dinner table in an attempt to "make everyone happy." In this case Han's humor use may be influenced by experiences with her father. Although unwittingly, adolescents use humor in varying degrees and for various reasons. Whether an adolescent uses humor to cover up nervousness, to engage in conversation or laugh at the expense of another, humor plays an important role in their lives. Humor can be developed through successful and failed humor interactions. Recall the interview with Chewbacca. She indicated that when she "pulled her skirt over her head" everyone in the

room laughed. This for her was a successful outcome therefore increasing the likelihood of ‘performing’ similar acts. Relating back to Erickson, successful and unsuccessful humorous experiences contribute to Chewbacca’s own humor identity.

Humor as a Form and Function

The ability to use humor grows, changes, and develops with every experience. Because every individual's accumulation of experience is different, the meaning and use of humor in any one situation is unique as well (Poland, 1990). The functions that humor serves then are not necessarily dictated by the form it takes. For example, the function of humor may be as a stress release or a coping mechanism, but its form may vary with every humorous experience. Humor and laughter serve many functions. Two functions that have presented themselves in this study are humor use as a social phenomena and as a reflection of coming to terms with confusing and stressful life experiences.

In the movie Star Wars, Chewbacca and Han Solo have a unique ‘joking’ relationship. The nature of this joking, however, would not be appropriate with Darth Vader because of their totally different relationship. They were rivals rather than friends. There is no ‘right answer’ when it comes to what is the most appropriate humor in a particular situation. For example, remember R2-D2 making fun of the girl on their school ski trip? This may seem inappropriate to you or to me, but in the right situation, with the right group of people, and given the right circumstances, this form of humor may have effectively served a necessary function. What may be appropriate humor in one situation may not be appropriate in another situation. Think back to Boba Fett and her sailing trip. When remembering this experience, Boba was able to ‘take a step back’ from herself in the situation and examine how it affected her. “The decentering necessary to laugh at

ourselves reliably suggests flexible self boundaries and mastery over even the most intractable of individual issues and social situations” (Strozier, 1987, p. 53). In some sense Boba had perhaps developed what Strozier (1987) calls, a mature capacity to reflect and learn from the experience. This gift of laughter allows Boba to acknowledge urges, frustrations, hopes and disappointments, with a sense of humor in which bitterness is tamed but not denied (Poland, 1990). In an imperfect world people learn to deal with the realities of their life and even find delight in them, something Poland (1990, p. 199) calls “the gift of laughter.” To Poland then, a developed sense of humor can be a sign of a flexible and cohesive self which in turn contributes to a sense of psychological, emotional and social health. Remember Chewbacca and her ability to laugh at herself about her apparent “control issues.” This demonstrates a great amount of self-insight on her behalf, acceptance for all her faults and the ability to be amused by them.

Humor in Health Promotion

Podilchak (1992) argues that the healthiest form of humor is experienced as being in-fun where those involved momentarily feel equal with each other. Remember Chewbacca exclaiming how much she enjoyed being asked questions and my response about how difficult it was to think of questions. When that situation occurred, both Chewbacca and I shared a moment where, in spite of the different roles we played, we nonetheless stood on equal ground. The passed quickly though and we reverted back to me as the interviewer in-charge and Chewbacca as the responsive interviewee.

What if humorous expression that contributes to a cohesive sense of self is also an indication of health at the moment it occurs? If it is, should those interested in promoting health not be looking for ways to deliberately cultivate such humorous experience?

When I first considered these questions, I thought there had to be a relationship between health and humor. What can be more health promoting than a good belly laugh (you know, the one that you feel for days later)? I asked my husband to put on his thinking cap and help me out. Bob stated that he 'is a plumber' and knew very little about health or humor. After I briefly explained both concepts, he put his thinking cap on, and he thought. Finally after some time he commented "Well...not having a sense of humor just isn't good." True, I thought, but how might his astute observation relate to promoting the health of adolescents like the ones in my study?

"Health Promotion is defined as the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health" (Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986, p. 1). I asked myself, if health is seen as a resource for everyday life, what are the prerequisites for health? If peace, food, income and shelter are so important, why can't we add humor to our lives? I further speculated, that if public policy and strengthened community action is important in health promotion, perhaps we should 1) legislate that all people must use their sense of humor four to five times a day, and 2) form a "Not having a sense of humor just isn't good" community coalition! Well, perhaps it is a little too easy to make fun of Bob's simple declaration.

On a more serious note, however, maybe Bob's thinking cap was actually turned on 'high.' Perhaps what I needed to do was to think smaller! I turned to the analogy of 'upstream thinking' where a swiftly flowing river represents illness and health care professionals "are so caught up in rescuing victims from the river that they have no time to look upstream to see who is pushing their patients into the perilous waters" (Butterfield, 1990, p. 2). Working 'downstream,' the cause of the problem is never

solved. In health promotion, the idea is to work upstream to prevent the problem from happening in the first place. What would happen if such an upstream approach was employed in developing a sense of humor? Helping people develop their ability to put things in perspective and to laugh at themselves might keep them from falling in the waters of 'taking life so seriously that there is no space for fun nor pleasure' or of an 'all-to-fragile' ego that is unable to cope with anything less than continuous approval.

Now I know that this may not be a very grassroots concept, but keep following me. Perhaps we should think of 'humor health' as an enabling tool. Could a healthy sense of humor be looked upon as a resource for people attaining their health potential? Why shouldn't a well-developed sense of humor be considered as an important determinant of health? Being able to put things in perspective and seeing the humor in the curves life throws one might be as healthy a choice as say, eating an apple a day!

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986) states that the development of personal skills is one strategy for obtaining health. In this strategy an individual is enabled to learn throughout life and to prepared themselves for all stages of life (Labonte, unknown). The Ottawa Charter indicates that it is a health professional's role to provide information and education to support an individual's personal and professional development. Can effective humor use not be considered a skill that may be developed and learned over time to help an individual, or group become healthy? In his professional health promotion training workshops, Labonte asks his participants to describe a time when they felt healthy. Typical responses included as sense of belonging, having family and friends, and being creative. Strozier (1987) states that "humor is one mark, along with empathy and creativity, by which we can judge health and vitality in the self" (p.53).

How can people, in general, and adolescents, in particular, be encouraged to perceive their sense of humor as a significant health resource for them to use?

Maybe it is time that those of us who are interested in health promotion to seriously look at the deliberate cultivation of humor as something integral to health status. The Population Health Promotion Model developed by Hamilton and Bhatti (1996) is a culmination of important health promotion literature that examines the what, how and who of health promotion activities. To clarify this further the model uses three questions to guide health promotion action: 1) On what health determinant should we take action?, 2) How should we take action? and 3) With whom or on what level should we act? By looking at what determines health, the model suggests what actions need to be undertaken and where these actions need to be directed. This model essentially “shows how a population health approach can be implemented through action on the full range of health determinants by means of health promotion strategies” (Hamilton & Bhatti, 1996, p. 7). Furthermore, this model can be used to consider how humor might be deliberately cultivated as a health promotion strategy. For example, family environments could be seen as a place where family members might learn how to reframe stressful situations through humor, a strategy which could be viewed as a positive coping skill. In such a case, the level of action (the who) would be the family, the health determinant (the what) would be personal coping skills and the health promotion strategy (the how) would be creating supportive environments.

If the focus is a specific health concern, a community group might be encouraged to advocate for the development of an at-risk adolescent support group project that might include the exploration of adolescent humor through a local media outlet ... for and by

adolescents. In this scenario the health determinant (the what) would be healthy adolescent development, the level of action (the who) would be the community and the health promotion strategy (the how) would be the ways to strengthen community action. As a framework, this model provides some organizational guidance for the planning and implementation of health promotion activities

Conclusion

In the movie Star Wars episode I, there is a scene where the young Darth Vader, Anakin Skywalker learns about the presence of small microscopic life forms that reside in all living cells from his mentor, Qui-Gon-Jinn. It is explained that these life forms share a symbiotic relationship with the individual that proves to be mutually advantageous. Without these microscopic life forms, life could not exist and the characters in Star Wars would have no knowledge of the force. Qui-Gon-Jinn then offers some advice, telling Anakin to quiet his mind so that the microscopic life forms may speak to him. As I look back at the literature I have reviewed and the humor I tried to uncover in the stories of the adolescents who participated in this study, all along I have suspected that humor in its best form is integral to health. While the humor I had hoped to find in the way adolescents might talk about the stresses in their lives did not surface as boldly as I had hoped it might, in all its attempt to elude close examination, it none-the-less surfaced here and there, at times because of my doings, at other times because of the adolescent I was interviewing. Humor, to me, is like a microscopic life form. Without humor, life for me could not exist, my sense of humor continually speaks to me and is a tool I use everyday of my life.

No matter what form humor takes or how often it occurs in-fun humor is what we need to strive for as a means of promoting health. This form of humor establishes a sense of 'being equal with another' and 'we-ness.' With the shared social situation and elimination of hierarchical differences, the humorous event is experienced as a moment of fun. When this even playing field is achieved, humor can be enjoyed to its full potential and ultimately viewed as integral to health. As health promoting professionals, it is important that we encourage individual differences in adolescent's sense and use of humor. Difficulties arise when we attempt to stifle the humor of adolescents by imposing our notions of what humor is, what is appropriate and what a humorous experience should look like for them. There is a need for helping adolescents learn about the importance of humor and how it can both reflect and be used as a means for attaining personal and social health. It is my hope this research endeavor will provide some insight into how this might be done.

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APPENDIX A

Individual Consent Form

Title of Project: Humor and Stressful Life Events: Stories of Adolescents

Principal Investigator(s): Sylvia D. Zuidema
Centre for Health Promotion Studies
University of Alberta
438-6955

Co-Investigator(s): Dr. Jeanette Boman
University of Alberta
Faculty of Nursing
492-9443

Part 2 (to be completed by the research subject):

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet?	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time? You do not have to give a reason and it will not affect your care.	Yes	No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand who will have access to your records?	Yes	No
Do you understand that the interviews will be tape-recorded?	Yes	No

This study was explained to me by: _____

I agree to take part in this study.

_____ Signature of Research Participant	_____ Date	_____ Witness
_____ Printed Name		_____ Printed Name

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

_____ Signature of Investigator or Designee	_____ Date
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APPENDIX B

Parental Consent Form

Title of Project: Humor and Stressful Life Events: Stories of Adolescents

Principal Investigator(s): Sylvia D. Zuidema
Centre for Health Promotion Studies
University of Alberta
438-6955

Co-Investigator(s): Dr. Jeanette Boman
University of Alberta
Faculty of Nursing
492-9443

Part 2 (to be completed by the research subject’s parents):

Do you understand that your child has been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet?	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in your child taking part in this research study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that your child is free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time? Your child does not have to give a reason and it will not affect your child’s care.	Yes	No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand who will have access to your child’s records?	Yes	No
Do you understand that your child’s interviews will be tape-recorded?	Yes	No

This study was explained to me by: _____

I agree for my child to take part in this study.

_____ Signature of Research Participant’s Parent	_____ Date	_____ Witness
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_____ Printed Name	_____ Printed Name
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I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

_____ Signature of Investigator or Designee	_____ Date
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APPENDIX C

Parental Information Sheet

Title of Project: Humor and Stressful Life Events: Stories of Adolescents

Sylvia Zuidema (MSc Candidate)
Centre for Health Promotion Studies
University of Alberta
438-6955

Dr. Jeanette Boman (Supervisor)
Faculty of Nursing
University of Alberta
492-9443

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the place of humorous expression in the life stories of adolescents who have experienced a self-defined stressful life event.

Procedure: The researcher will ask your adolescent about his/her life experiences. There will be three interviews and each will last about one hour.

The discussion will be tape-recorded and the tapes will be transcribed. Only the researcher and persons working with the researcher have access to this information. The information that your adolescent shares with the researcher will not be shared with you unless he/she approves.

All names and other identifying material will be erased from the transcripts and the tapes.

The researcher will need to contact your adolescent to clarify whether the information reflects the content of the interviews after the tapes are transcribed.

Participation: No harm nor any direct benefit to your adolescent is expected in this study. Should at any time your adolescent becomes upset or uncomfortable during the interview, the researcher will stop the interview and discuss with him/her possible ways of helping to deal with their distress (eg. talk with parents, counselor). Results from this study may help us understand how adolescents talk about getting through their self-defined crisis.

Once deciding to participate in the study your adolescent may drop out at any time by telling the researcher. He/she does not have to answer any questions that they do not want to. There is no punishment for withdrawing from the study.

No participant's name will appear in the study. All tapes, transcriptions, and notes will be kept in a locked cabinet separate from the consent forms for seven years. Data may be used for another study in the future, if the researcher receives approval from the appropriate ethics review committee. All information will be held confidential except when professional codes of ethics and or legislation require reporting. For example, this means that if there is any information that suggests your adolescent is a victim of abuse than the researcher is required to report it to the proper authorities under the Child Welfare Act. I would, of course discuss this with you and your adolescent as well.

We may publish or present the information and findings of this study at conferences, but names or any other identifying material will not be used. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you can call the researcher at the above number. If you have any concerns about aspects of this study, you may contact Dr. Gerry Glassford at 430-7180.

APPENDIX D

Individual Information Sheet

Title of Project: Humor and Stressful Life Events: Stories of Adolescents

Sylvia Zuidema (MSc Candidate)
Centre for Health Promotion Studies
University of Alberta
438-6955

Dr. Jeanette Boman (Supervisor)
Faculty of Nursing
University of Alberta
492-9443

This letter is written to give you information about the study that I would like you to participate in. This study looks at your own experience with stress. I would like to interview you for about one hour, three times. These interviews will be tape recorded and typed up so that you can read them over after we have talked. Following the interviews there will be a meeting with anyone who participated in the study. You are most welcome to come to this meeting if you want to.

I will not share this information with your parents unless it is ok with you. Your name will be kept private at all times. There is not benefit to you participating in the study nor do I expect you will be harmed by it. If at any time you are uncomfortable or upset when talking to me, I will stop the interview and we will discuss ways to help you. You can leave the study at any time without worrying about being punished.

I will keep all information you give me private unless you tell me something that might be a treat to your health and well being that someone in authority needs to know about. Like if someone was hurting you. I would discuss this with you if this were necessary. If you have any questions please call me at 438-6955 or Dr. Gerry Glassford.

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